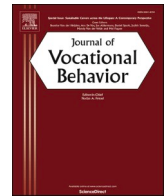




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I wouldn't be working this way if I had a family - Differences in remote workers' needs for supervisor's family-supportiveness depending on the parental status

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how working remotely blurs the boundaries between work and non-work domains by contrasting the experiences of employees with different parental status. The study further shows how leaders can mitigate this blurring via family-supportive supervisor behaviours (FSSB), and extends the concept to encompass non-work roles beyond the family. Working from home leads to an increasing intertwining of work and non-work roles, with family status playing a significant role in shaping boundary challenges and support needs. Through semi-structured interviews with 89 employees working from home in various industries, the study reveals that parents and non-parents, distinct in their challenges and requirements, exhibit varied demonstrated needs from their leaders. As parent employees require flexible boundaries to attend to their family responsibilities, non-parent employees need safeguards to maintain boundaries around their private life. The results underscore that FSSB benefit employees regardless of parental status. This study emphasizes the importance of employers tailoring their work-life programs to accommodate the diverse needs of employees, and recognizes the pivotal role of supervisors in attuning their supportive behaviours to employees' work-nonwork boundary needs and preferences.

1. Introduction

Modern work life is in turmoil and characterized by uncertainty and change. Recent and current global crises, confounded by exponential technological progress have placed a strain on the wellbeing and work-life patterns of all individuals. The rapid shift from onsite work to remote or hybrid work particularly accelerated during the pandemic from early 2020 onwards. These changes have made workplaces less place-dependent with interaction being intensively digitally mediated (Allen et al., 2021; Haun et al., 2022). Although the pandemic has eased and some employers have introduced more onsite-dependent practices, working from home and remote work in general are becoming permanent employment practices in many modern workplaces (Vyas, 2022).

Working from home offers various benefits, including reduced co-worker interruptions, increased productivity and flexibility, and the elimination of work commutes, which all save time and enable employees to allocate more time resource for preferred activities

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(Mäkelä et al., 2023). Yet, working remotely presents challenges as it requires individuals to integrate their work and non-work roles within the same physical and temporal location, leading to a blurring of work-nonwork boundaries (Adisa et al., 2022; Fukumura et al., 2021). Consequently, this distortion of work-nonwork boundaries potentially creates confusion regarding priorities and expectations, with one domain encroaching upon the other (Fukumura et al., 2021; Lonska et al., 2021). Indeed, firm boundaries between work and home domains have been found to be essential for achieving a good work-life balance (Allen et al., 2021) and fostering a psychological detachment (healthy break) from work (Haun et al., 2022).

It is important to note that in many professions, the boundary between work and personal life has long been blurred, as modern technology has now more than ever enabled work to be less constrained by time and location (Park & Jex, 2011; Golden & Veiga, 2008). Work has transitioned to smart devices, extending its reach into people's homes, and challenging the work-home interface (McDowall & Kinman, 2017; Derks et al., 2014b). This evolution has posed challenges to disengaging from work (Derks et al., 2014a), and may lead to extended workdays and an unhealthy pressure to always be on-duty and available (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015).

Traditionally, studies have regarded non-work responsibilities primarily as family and childcare-related responsibilities. This perspective is largely centred on the nuclear family and parenting roles (Kelliher et al., 2019). The narrow focus on childcare responsibilities has long limited the definition of "life" and excluded non-family-related activities and diverse family structures (Keeney et al., 2013; Prakash, 2018), for example when taking care of elderly parents or a spouse. The traditional emphasis in work-life literature has been criticized for neglecting diversity, including individuals with non-traditional family structures (Beigi et al., 2019). However, it is important to recognize that non-parent employees, similar to their parenting counterparts, also face challenges in managing work and non-work responsibilities and interests (Boiarintseva et al., 2022). There is a scarcity of studies specifically examining the unique boundary challenges faced by employees without parenting responsibilities compared to those with parenting responsibilities. As a result, only a limited knowledge exists on how to effectively support these groups in addressing their specific challenges, especially in the remote work context where differences may be even more pronounced than in the more traditional work setting. Therefore, the differences between these groups require further study.

Individuals have varying needs for managing their work and non-work interface based on multiple different factors, such as parental status, caregiving for extended family members, and other non-work responsibilities like volunteer work (Boiarintseva et al., 2022; Lonska et al., 2021). Consequently, there has been a call to pay more attention to studying the conditions of employees without family commitments (Jayasingam et al., 2023). Regarding the blurring of boundaries between work and life roles, remote work, as well as the always on duty and available culture, challenges the maintenance of these boundaries for all employees, regardless of their parental status (Adisa et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2021). The existing research highlights the benefits of boundaries, and the strategies individuals use to maintain them. Yet, there is the need to further understand the specific effects (both positive and negative) of boundary blurring (Cho, 2020). Therefore, further research should explore the impact of remote work on boundary management for employees of various family status (Cho, 2020). By conducting deeper research into comparing the conditions of people of varied family status (in particular, parenting and non-parenting employees), we are able to ascertain variations in needs to better devise how to support employees across the life spectrum.

Moreover, boundary maintenance has often been studied as an individual-controlled aspect, but it is influenced by various factors, including the availability of support, especially from supervisors (Koch & Binnewies, 2015). Supervisor support is considered crucial in achieving a balance between work and non-work obligations (Nabawanuka & Ekmekcioglu, 2022). In the context of supervisory support research, the concept of family-supportive supervisor behaviour (FSSB) has been previously examined. FSSB involves emotional and instrumental support from supervisors, who act as role models and implement creative work-family policies (Hammer et al., 2009). Although FSSB initially focused on family support, recent discussions have emphasized the broader non-work domain support that supervisors can lend to employees' lives outside of work, regardless of their parental status (Evanoff et al., 2020). It is therefore important to consider the issue of context when providing supportive behaviours, and recognize the diversity within work groups and tailor support accordingly (Crain & Stevens, 2018; Hammer et al., 2011). However, these aspects have been overlooked in previous studies, indicating a research gap that needs to be addressed (Crain & Stevens, 2018). Moreover, despite the importance of FSSB, research on FSSB in the remote work context is still in its infancy (Chambel et al., 2023). There is therefore a further need to explore the experiences of FSSB in remote work, particularly in contexts that extend beyond the traditional family structure, including the perspectives and support requirements of employees who do not have parenting responsibilities (Alexander et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2022).

The present study addresses these research needs by exploring the challenge of boundary blurring associated with remote work in parenting and non-parenting employees by answering the following research questions: 1) *How does working remotely blur the work-nonwork boundaries of parenting and non-parenting employees?* and 2), *What kind of supervisor support can reduce the effect of blurring boundaries?*

This study contributes to the vocational literature in three key ways. First, it broadens the understanding of the work-nonwork interface beyond the traditional family, by considering the complexities of managing boundaries for individuals with parenting or non-parenting status. Second, it sheds light on the mechanisms of boundary blurring in remote work, which have not been extensively explored before. Finally, as a third consideration, this study emphasizes the importance of supervisor support in addressing the challenges of blurred boundaries and expands the concept of FSSB to include non-family situations. The next section presents relevant literature on remote work boundaries, variations based on parental status, and the role of supervisor support.

2. Boundaries in remote work

Boundaries, or psychological borders, are often created and upheld between one's work and home roles (Kreiner et al., 2009).

Boundary theory posits that setting boundaries enables individuals to separate and exert control over their different roles, safeguarding them against interference from one role to another (Ashforth et al., 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Roles are typically separated in terms of both physical space and time (Ashforth et al., 2000), for instance work roles are tied to working times and working location which form boundaries to the role. Role transitions are influenced by the flexibility and permeability of these boundaries. Flexible boundaries allow smooth role transitions, while rigidity makes these transitions more challenging. Permeable boundaries allow roles to intrude with one another, for example, when individuals may be physically present in one role while mentally or behaviourally engaged in another (Leroy et al., 2021). Thus, impermeable boundaries protect intrusions from one role into another. It has been noted that highly flexible and permeable boundaries contribute to the integration of work and home roles, allowing for seamless interactions and transitions between these domains (Ashforth et al., 2000; Voydanoff, 2005). However, highly integrated roles hinder achieving psychological decoupling, causing blurred boundaries and spill-over effects from one role to another, for instance where stress in one role transmits to and impacts the other role (Grzywacz, 2000). When the boundaries become blurred, individuals may experience interruptions from one role to another without warning, causing one role to disturb the other. This can lead to confusion regarding which role is more salient or prominent at a given time. Such boundary blurring involves behavioural and psychological implications, for instance multitasking or thinking about work in one's leisure time (Voydanoff, 2005). Boundary theory posits that the choice between role integration and segmentation depends on individual preferences. Yet, boundaries may be challenged in different contexts, which could enforce role integration, leading to a heightened experience of role violation or confusion (Ashforth et al., 2000). For instance, in a situation where employees are working from home, they may have no choice but to integrate their work and home roles during the workday, as they lack control over arising situations (Cho, 2020; Schieman et al., 2021).

2.1. The effects of remote work on work-nonwork boundaries

Remote work from home typically introduces a higher frequency of transitions between work and non-work domains, encompassing deliberate and unintended shifts (Delanoëje et al., 2019). The shift of work to the home environment eliminates the *physical boundary* between the traditional work location and the home location. Consequently, the concept of work hours becomes less defined, making it challenging to establish clear *temporal boundaries* as are usually associated with office hours (Adisa et al., 2022). Additionally, working from home requires the use of different work tools and devices, which can result in extended work hours and the blurring of temporal boundaries (Seeber & Erhardt, 2023). Remote work also risks introducing an 'always-on' culture, where the use of work technology at home can create perceived expectations for employees to be constantly available, further eroding regular work hours (Fukumura et al., 2021). Conversely, employees may feel pressure to attend to household matters during designated work hours, leading to multitasking and increased micro-transitions between roles (Adisa et al., 2022; Cho, 2020).

This erosion of physical and temporal boundaries highlights the importance of establishing *psychological boundaries* for personal space and privacy. The presence or absence of physical boundaries affects the flexibility and permeability of mental boundaries, which can result in unwanted spill-over or violations between different domains (Beauregard et al., 2019; Sinclair et al., 2020). However, remote work may also hinder the establishment of psychological boundaries. This is due to the fact that working from home challenges people's psychological detachment from work, as the home environment has turned into the workplace, and may keep reminding employees about work during non-work hours (Charalampous et al., 2022).

It is evident that remote work creates new conditions for work-nonwork boundaries. Publications based on boundary theories (Allen et al., 2021; Kreiner et al., 2009) have suggested that individuals employ various tactics to maintain boundaries. The delineation between work and other aspects of life is typically examined as an individual domain. However, maintaining boundaries is influenced by factors beyond the individual, such as the home environment and the supervisor (for a review, see Allen et al., 2014). These perspectives have received limited attention in research thus far, which gives rise to the necessity for more studies in relation to remote working, for which researchers have already produced a research agenda (Cho, 2020). Both previous and recent research findings have shown that remote work increases people's tendency to overwork (Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė et al., 2023). While previously, the reasons for overwork may have been a sense of guilt or a conscious effort to reciprocate the opportunity for remote work (Hilbrecht et al., 2008), studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that the same phenomenon occurs when remote work is involuntary (Taskin et al., 2023). In such cases, individuals do not feel burdened to prove that they are 'truly working' or to demonstrate their productivity. Therefore, it is important to investigate the mechanisms that cause individuals to experience work encroachment into their leisure time in remote work settings.

2.2. Boundaries of parents and non-parents

Role expectations influence individuals' abilities to maintain role boundaries (Ashforth et al., 2000). In the context of remote work, where work and non-work roles become intertwined, the expectations surrounding non-work roles may become particularly prominent. Parents who are working from home and have children in need of care may encounter challenges in separating their work role from their responsibilities as caregivers within the home environment (Allen et al., 2015). It is likely that in the remote work context, parents and non-parents experience distinct boundary challenges. A report on remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chung, Seo, Forbes, & Birkett, 2020) indicates that while both parents and non-parents identified a blurring of boundaries as the primary challenge of remote work, their work-life demands varied. Parents specifically faced additional challenges such as increased housework, childcare responsibilities, and distractions at home. In contrast, non-parents reported a negative impact on their relationships with colleagues as a prominent issue. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that employees' life situations are influenced by more than just immediate family dynamics, with various responsibilities having a cumulative impact on their overall burden. The concept of

caring responsibilities extends beyond caregiving to children under 15 years, encompassing a broader scope of individuals requiring care, including the elderly, sick, and disabled individuals (Eurostat, 2019). For instance, non-parents can also have caregiving responsibilities beyond their immediate family. This includes responsibilities such as taking care of elderly parents or tending to adult children and grandchildren, and other non-work commitments such as hobbies and volunteer work (Beauregard & Henry, 2009; Boiarintseva et al., 2022).

Research conducted in other work contexts slightly differs to that of the current study (in terms of industry and type of work, and non-remote contexts), yet suggests that there may indeed be some differences between the groups. A few studies have revealed variations in boundary challenges between parents and non-parents in contexts that also differ slightly from typical office work scenarios. Santos (2015) studied academics, for which the boundaries between home and other aspects of life can differ from typical office-based employment. The study observed that parents of young children possessed a greater capacity to establish thicker boundaries between work and non-work domains. In contrast, non-parents tended to have more permeable boundaries, integrating their work and home activities. In other words, in the case of non-parents, work would serve as a way of spending time, in effect substituting for activities such as day-care and hobbies that would otherwise be in the lives of parenting workers. Ultimately, work had a tendency of taking on the role of a surrogate child. Another study conducted in a different context provides similar indications (Lawson et al., 2013). This study examined hotel employees, who may otherwise have specific work schedules, different to that of typical office workers. The research demonstrated that non-parenting employees experienced higher negative spill-over from work to home, and also tended to work longer hours and have more permeable boundaries compared to their colleagues with children. In this case, a cause may have been due to the lack of reasons to refuse extra work such as taking on overtime and substituting for co-workers.

In a further study focusing on high-profile international professionals in service consultancy companies with demanding work roles (Niemistö et al., 2020), it was found that parenting employees were more aware of work-nonwork boundaries than their non-parent counterparts. It was observed that within this specific context, parents encountered non-work constraints in establishing boundaries. However, similar to their non-parent counterparts, they exhibited a willingness to push these boundaries to showcase their equal capability and challenge the perception that the parent role hindered their abilities. In another study that examined parents and non-parents in a boundaryless work setting characterized by flexible schedules, high workloads and demanding roles, it was discovered that a lack of boundaries resulted in longer working hours for both groups, irrespective of whether they had non-work parenting responsibilities or not (Pedersen & Jeppesen, 2012). It seems that the demands of work in these settings, causing a pressure to perform, are the underlying causes for boundary bending and subsequent overwork. These studies further support the notion that the presence of parenting responsibilities can impact on the awareness and management of work-nonwork boundaries. In some scenarios such as seemingly boundaryless work (i.e., business ownership), even awareness does not prevent the permeation of boundaries for either group. However, studies tend to reveal little about the types of blurring experienced by different groups, both in terms of influential factors, as well as in terms of how the domains encroach on one another.

Based on previous research (Haar, 2013; Reimann et al., 2022), work-life issues appear to be a struggle and a concern for both parents and non-parents. However, it has been observed that different circumstances can present distinct challenges within these groups. Examining studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, Schieman et al. (2021) demonstrated that remote working parents experienced an increased work-life conflict. In contrast, non-parents or individuals without children living at home reported a decreased sense of conflict. These findings are not surprising, as during the pandemic, parents in particular faced heightened family demands (Lonska et al., 2021), largely due to lockdown measures and the temporary closures of schools and childcare facilities in many countries. Another view is provided by Reimann et al. (2022), who showed that conflicts in managing the work-life interface (particularly work-family conflict) increased equally for both parent and non-parent employees. This highlights the potential significance of organizational support in effectively managing the work-life interface. This perspective will be further examined in the following section.

2.3. Mitigation of boundary challenges through family-supportive supervisor behaviours

Working remotely has undoubtedly altered and tested people's ability to manage their work-nonwork boundaries, regardless of parental status. Traditionally, the management of one's boundaries has been seen as the individual's responsibility (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012; Reissner et al., 2021; Shirmohammadi et al., 2023). Yet, it is known that support can help with this form of management (Koch & Binnewies, 2015), with support from a supervisor being particularly highlighted as the strongest form of aid (Ferguson et al., 2015). Besides formal work-related support, an important element in managing the work-nonwork balance is through informal support, focusing on social relationships, and social support. This especially applies in relation to the social support provided by the supervisor (Marescaux et al., 2020; Sargent et al., 2022).

Supervisors, and the support they are able to offer, are important factors in lowering the experience of work-nonwork conflict, as well as increasing overall employee wellbeing (Kossek et al., 2011). However, changes in work life require more direct support across one's life domains (Vaziri et al., 2020), and support needs to be adjusted to these altered circumstances. A meta-analysis conducted by Kossek et al. (2011) showed that direct support from supervisors, such as family supportive behaviours, can be more effective than general forms of social support in reducing work-family conflict. It is suggested that this support is effectively demonstrated through the concept of FSSB, which refers to the behaviours exhibited by supervisors that support families, encompassing emotional support, instrumental support, role model behaviours, and creative work-family management (Hammer et al., 2009).

FSSB is a multidimensional phenomenon where supervisors actively integrate work and non-work domains through proactive and reactive actions, while serving as role models (Straub, 2012). FSSB is a context-specific form of support enacted by supervisors, representing an extra role accompanied by proactive behaviour patterns (Crain & Stevens, 2018). Within the context of remote work,

supervisors can demonstrate supportive behaviour, such as displaying empathy and understanding when employees face family demands while working (emotional support). They can also demonstrate this by being open to the adjustment of, for example, meeting times to accommodate employee family needs (instrumental support). Supervisors may suggest creative ways to balance work and non-work responsibilities (creative support), and may also avoid contacting employees outside their work schedule (role modelling) (Kossek & Distelberg, 2009).

It can be stated that the remote work context demands much stronger non-work active communication by supervisors, and additionally requires higher levels of flexibility compared to traditional conceptualizations of FSSB (Thomas et al., 2022). It has been shown that FSSB provides important resources (Pensar & Rousi, 2023) that aid workers in managing the professional and non-work domains, especially in situations where remote work is practiced intensively (Chambel et al., 2023). Additionally, FSSB has been proven as an important means for increasing remote workers' control of their own boundaries (Carvalho et al., 2022). To date, the empirical evidence on FSSB in the context of remote work is still limited, and more research is needed on the role of supervisors in providing support for boundary management and protection in this setting, especially from the viewpoint of diverse employees. A recent study has shown that there are differences in how parent and nonparent employees experience remote work (Song & Gao, 2020), and this draws attention to the fact that this viewpoint should be included in discussions of supervisory support. Even though the importance of expanding FSSB research to include people from diverse backgrounds has been emphasized (Crain & Stevens, 2018), the focus of informal support provided by supervisors has so far been placed on the family (i.e. parenting-related elements of life). However, a recent study by Reimann et al. (2022) revealed that supervisory support was equally important for parenting and non-parenting employees in preventing boundary blurring, or a mutual interference of work-nonwork. However, the authors were unable to find studies that investigated the connection between FSSB and the boundary management of diverse employees.

3. Method

The present study aims to advance knowledge on employees' work-nonwork management boundary challenges and support needs in the context of remote work. The purpose is to widen this understanding through individuals' subjective work-life experiences, utilizing a large and diverse sample of remote workers. A qualitative semi-structured interview approach was adopted. A series of 89 interviews was conducted by six researchers via the Zoom communications platform. In order to find out employees' subjective experiences concerning work-life balance and boundary management, a literature review was first undertaken, followed by the application of the framework developed by Casper et al. (2018) to formulate the interview questions. The main idea was to explore the types of issues that arose in remote work in workers of diverse backgrounds, and to gain a better understanding of the role of supervisors in supporting work-nonwork balance. The study sample included individuals from various professions, larger organizations, and with different personal and family circumstances.

3.1. Participants

The sample included 89 remote workers from six large corporations with over 1000 staff members in Finland, spanning various sectors (process and information technology, business services, telecommunications, and insurance). The corporations designated a single point of contact to recruit supervisors and teams for the study. Random purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) was employed to recruit participants. In order to achieve this, calls for participation were sent to random members of assigned teams and supervisors. Altogether, 31 supervisors and one to four employees from their teams participated in the study. The participants were aged 23–60, with a mean age of 41.64. The sample included various professions such as those involved in product development, sales, customer service, training, accounting, and HR services. These professions were engaged in regular office-hour work from 8 am to 4 pm. A slight majority (62.9 %) identified as female. Most participants (78 %) shared a household with a spouse, while a fifth (20 %) lived alone without a spouse or children. Nearly half of the participants (48.3 %) had underage children residing in their households, comprising of 17 fathers and 26 mothers. All participants were working remotely from home at the request of their employers to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (according to Finnish Government recommendations). A majority (70.7 %) had prior experience with remote working, although only a small percentage (5.6 %) had primarily worked remotely before the pandemic, a significant portion (38.7 %) had engaged in part-time remote work, and nearly one-fifth (17.9 %) had no experience of remote working prior to the pandemic. At the time of the interviews, upper secondary schools in Finland had switched to distance learning, and children at schools and daycare centres were ordered to be quarantined in cases of exposure to infected individuals. Therefore, it is likely that many of the participants with parenting responsibilities had children at home for at least part of their working hours.

3.2. Data collection

Participation in the study was voluntary and each participant booked their own interview via online booking application. As participants signed up for the interview and selected a time slot that suited them, they were informed that the data would be anonymized by the use of pseudonyms instead of personal identifiers, ensuring that the published data remains untraceable to specific individuals or organizations. Participants were also informed of their right to request the removal of their data from the study at any time. Following the registration process, an invitation and link to the online interview was sent to the registered participant. The participant had the option to choose whether to use a camera or keep the interview as audio. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by six researchers (including two of the authors of this paper) between October and December 2020. The format covered predetermined themes, while also allowing participants to raise relevant topics (Mason, 2002). Participants were asked about their remote

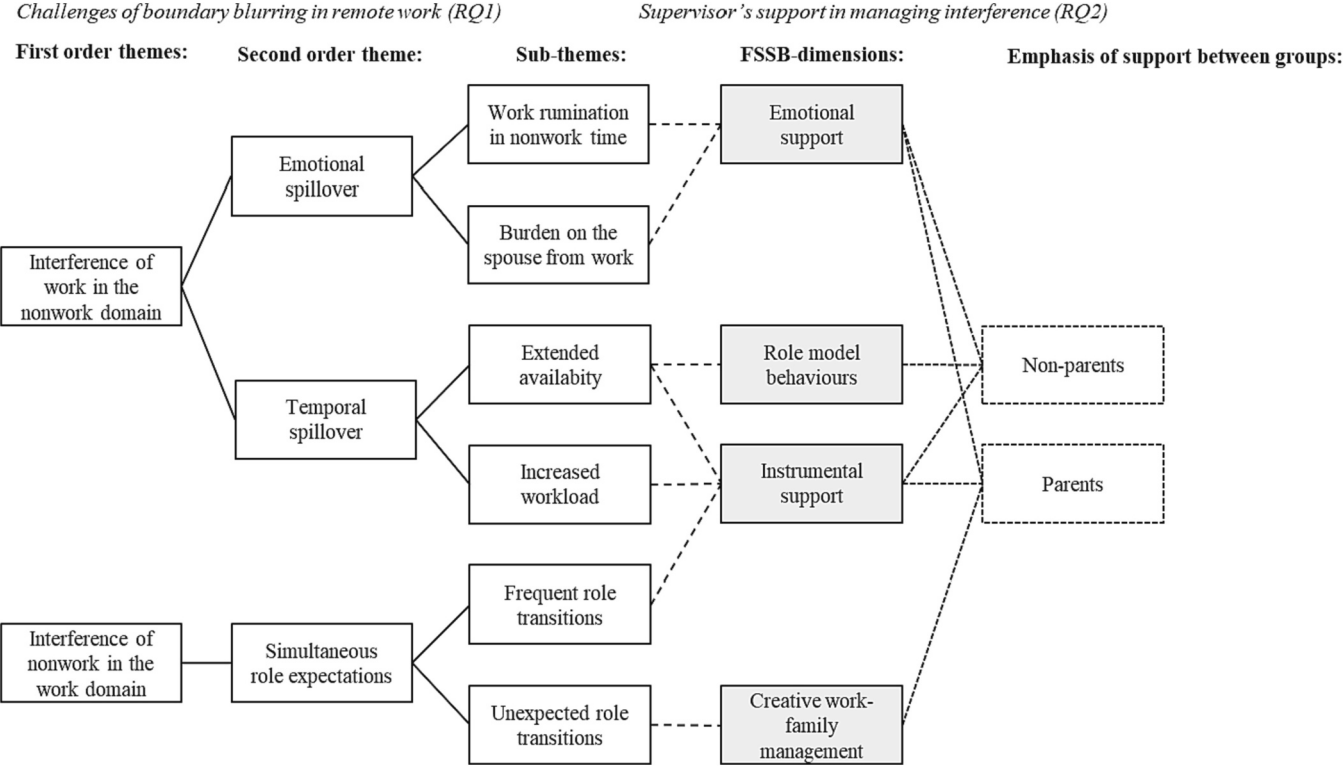


Fig. 1. Relations between themes for identified boundary challenges and the FSSB-dimensions.

Table 1

Example quotations from remote workers of boundary challenges and means of mitigation by the supervisor on the challenges.

Sub-theme	Example quotations from non-parent employees	Example quotations from parent employees	Observed similarities and differences
Interference of work in the nonwork domain			
Emotional spill-over			
Work rumination in the nonwork time	Non-parent employees describe the challenges that emotional work bothers may cause, but stress the supervisor's emotional support as an essential mitigation: Solo-living employee: "Getting your mind off work is a lot harder [in remote work]. If there's a tough situation, say failure or challenges, it affects my emotions. Having a supervisor's support is crucial in those moments. I don't want to be thinking about work in the evenings because work issues come into my dreams and affect my ability to fall asleep." Employee living with a spouse: "The feeling of failure - it is easier to experience it in remote work, and it tends to stick longer when working remotely. When bad feelings hit me, I reach out to my supervisor. I rely on her quite a bit for that kind of venting."	In this situation a parent employee explains that family helps to switch off work thoughts, but in challenging situations the supervisor's emotional support is necessary in preventing work pressures: "I try to calm down in the evenings by not opening the computer or checking emails. My counterbalance to work is doing things at home and spending time with my family. When the computer is turned off, family life begins as it is. I receive good support from my supervisor, and I can shape the content of my work to a large extent, removing any unnecessary pressure. If a situation were to arise where I start to stress a lot [and it disturbs me in the spare time] I get in touch with my supervisor and discuss how we can overcome it together. I wouldn't sit alone in a dark corner pondering how to handle it."	• Both parents and non-parents experience elevated emotional spill-over in the remote work situation • Risk for emotional spill-over due to unresolved work issues is elevated for solo-living employees • Employees living with a spouse have opportunities to continue work rumination with spouse. • Supervisors' emotional support seems effective in hindering rumination and burden caused on spouse
Burden on the spouse from work	A non-parent employee exemplifies a situation where emotional support from the supervisor seems not to be sufficient with support coming instead from the spouse: "I miss having support in challenging situations. With my former supervisor, we had extensive conversations, mostly unrelated to work. [With my current supervisor], I long for that kind of interaction beyond work-related matters. I don't normally get angry, but there was this one situation where I had to raise my voice a little. People shouted on top of each other, and we ran out of time, leaving me with a lingering sense of adrenaline. It even affected me after the workday was over. I'm the type of person who appreciates addressing things straight away... My wife and I are both working remotely, and when I'm upstairs I run into my wife, and of course we end up discussing these things as well."	Parent employees explain that challenges are particularly difficult to handle alone in remote work, but the supervisor's emotional support could prevent an outburst to the spouse: "I'm quite self-critical and react strongly when things go wrong. Things bother me and can even ruin my entire day. In those moments, I need some intervention from my supervisor to reassure me that it's not as serious as I think. It helps me move on. I need to vent about it, and many times I take it out on my spouse now that we're working remotely."	
Temporal spill-over			
Extended availability	Non-parent employees clarify how temporal slippage easily occurs, but instrumental intervention and a role model helps draw the boundaries: Solo-living employee: "Now that you're at home, it's quite easy to think, 'I'll just finish this task now,' and then the day stretches and stretches. It doesn't really feel like it starts or ends properly at any point." Solo-living employee: "A good supervisor should step in and say: 'Hey, I've noticed you're consistently working ten-hour days. This isn't sustainable. Let's figure out how to reduce your workload. You need to finish	Parent employees extend their availability flexibly to reconcile work and home duties, but they need instrumental support from their supervisor to ensure that the rules for such flexibility are clear: "My day ends when I pick up the kids from daycare. I don't get any work done when they are at home. If I have to work, it's probably after they have gone to bed. I prioritize my family, and I try not to work much in the evenings. Certain types of tasks require more time, and maybe it means working longer days. But then again, I can take care of family chores during the workday, things that I couldn't do if I were at the office. It's a small convenience in daily	• Temporal spill-over may happen easier for non-parents with no child-minding obligations, while those obligations can prevent temporal spill-over for parents • Parents' temporal spill-over seems to relate to compensation of the time they spent on nonwork matters during work hours • Non-parents have an elevated need to safeguard nonwork time

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Sub-theme	Example quotations from non-parent employees	Example quotations from parent employees	Observed similarities and differences
Increased workload	work every day at six and do something else with your life.””	life that my supervisor particularly encourages.”	
	Remote working has added work content (e.g., the number of virtual meetings) contributing to temporal spill-over. It triggers a need for a supervisor's instrumental support :	“I used to work late into the night. It's challenging to tell a friend, ‘Sorry, my workday is over, and I'm off now.’ I find it important to establish ground rules. I've had discussions with my supervisor about this. He has adopted new ways and learned how to handle this remote situation effectively. I now receive support I need when I need it. Even though the distance has increased, closeness has taken its place – virtually.” Increased work content poses a challenge for parents, and the supervisor's instrumental support in prioritization of work and prevention of unnecessary work seems helpful:	• Increased workload in remote work is a universal challenge for both parents and non-parents • For parents, obligations at home may interrupt the workday, and prevent temporal spill-over • Supervisors' instrumental support in workload management is equally demanded by parents and non-parents in situations
	Solo-living employee: “I start early and I'm in meetings by eight with bleary eyes. Meetings usually wrap up around five or six in the evening. First then I start dealing with all the tasks in my agenda, which extends my day quite a lot. That's the point where I should just stop and continue in the morning.” Employee who lives with spouse: “My workdays have started to stretch too long. Unfinished tasks weigh on my mind... I probably would have received more support if I had realized to ask for it. My supervisor is very busy; there's no time for informal conversations in remote work. As long as things are working well, he's not interested in daily routines.”	“I usually try to wrap up around four, because my children often have activities starting at five, although, sometimes I might still be hanging around on Teams even on my phone if there's something urgent.” “I rely on my supervisor when things get tough. She quickly realizes that I've got a problem I can't solve by myself. I currently have a lot of work to do, and I need help deciding which tasks to do first. In the past, these issues were only dealt with sporadically if there was time. But now [in remote work], we have a set time every week to follow up these things. My supervisor also makes sure our team doesn't end up with tasks that aren't ours to do.”	
Interference of nonwork in the work domain			
Simultaneous role expectations			
Frequent role transitions	While the home environment is visible to remote workers and household chores make themselves known, they do not seem to be compelling for non-parents as exemplified in this quote from a non-parent employee living with a spouse:	Parent employees delineate their need to seamlessly navigate between work and home roles, but the supervisor's instrumental support is needed to ensure the flexibility that is needed for the frequent transitions:	• Home environment introduces frequent transitions between work and home roles for all employees, but for parents those are often in relation to obligations, and cannot be avoided or delayed
	Employee, who lives with a spouse: “I work here from home, because my wife is at a different location for work, and there aren't any distractions at home. I can easily go without doing the dishes during the day if I feel like not doing them now and instead leave them until the workday is over.”	“My kids come home early, and even if I continue working I'm much more present as a mother now. I can have seamless contact with them, I have time to ask about their homework and be there for them. I can drive them to hobbies, as early as at 3 pm, and even stay to watch them. This rhythm shapes my workday... My supervisor enables this and understands that I have more in my life than just work. She allows me to work at different times of the day as long as I stick to the agreed amount of work. Whether I start early or prefer working late, my supervisor supports that. Or if I need to take a break in the middle of the day, I can do it without asking for permission.”	
Unexpected role transitions	Non-parents in this dataset seem to experience fewer unexpected role transitions, although they do occur. It appears more typical for them to adhere to work hours and negotiate this with their	For parents, unexpected home role expectations often arise, requiring specific creative work-family management support from supervisors to address them effectively.	• Parents have an elevated need for their supervisor's creative work-family management support because as working in the home environment engages them with

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Sub-theme	Example quotations from non-parent employees	Example quotations from parent employees	Observed similarities and differences
	work group: Solo-living employee: "We [colleagues] try to stick to normal work hours. If there's any extra plans, we let others know. If I am in a situation where my colleagues need my help at a specific time and I know I'm occupied at that time [with other issues than work], I'll inform them beforehand, and we'll address it later."	"[During the lockdown], I experienced stress as I had to assist my children with their schoolwork alongside my own tasks. Now that they have returned to school, the stress has diminished as there are fewer interruptions during my work hours. However, a challenge remains. As the kids return home from school my workday still continues. I need to ensure their whereabouts, and it adds stress." "We are such a close-knit work community [...]. I don't think we could do this [remote work] without such a great group of people. What happens if someone falls or fails? With this support network, it's really comforting to know that if someone stumbles, others will be there to catch them. If I were to raise any concerns or issues to my supervisor, I know she would act to address them. It's really comforting to have that kind of knowledge and support."	numerous unexpected situations that require their involvement in childcare.

work environment and their experiences of transitioning from office-based work to remote work locations. Team members shared insights about how supervisors managed and supported employees, and supervisors described their perspectives on how they engaged in supporting employees remotely. They also described a typical remote workday and identified factors that supported or challenged work-life management in the remote context. The interviews ranged from 40 to 90 min and were conducted by the research team. They were recorded with the participant's permission, and later transcribed verbatim and anonymized. The authors then translated the interview quotations used in the presented research into English.

3.3. Data analysis

In this study, we employed thematic analysis methods to ascertain modes of support that help both parent and non-parent employees in managing their work-life interface. Additionally, we explored the differences that exist between these groups. Nvivo software was used to support the qualitative analysis. Constructivist grounded theory (Glaser, 2007) and an inductive analytical approach (Azungah, 2018) were used to analyse connections between the data and its findings to existing literature on boundary theories and FSSB (Gioia, 2021; Gioia et al., 2013), while identifying additional prevalent themes emerging from the current data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis aimed to offer a comprehensive representation of the dataset, delineating the attributes of boundary challenges and also the support provided by supervisors in mitigating these challenges. The initial analysis entailed deriving first-order concepts. This was followed by a categorization and coding of emergent themes. These were assembled as codes, which were analysed with the purpose of highlighting disparities based on participants' parental status. The first step in the analysis involved the first and second authors of this article carefully familiarizing themselves with the responses and taking notes in order to better understand the data. The authors then compared their information to find both differences and similarities. Open coding was conducted to recognize similar statements, and the codes were arranged into related groups. While conducting the open coding, the focus was on identifying intriguing aspects within the data and highlighting sections that suggested potential categories. Each reported occurrence was treated as a single unit and coded only once. The data was compared between researchers to decide if its content fitted into an existing category, or whether it was better suited for a new category. A focus was placed on recognizing the characteristics of challenges that participants described in relation to their referred boundary management strategies. The researchers additionally focused on the types of support mentioned as helping the interviewees to maintain sufficient boundaries. These were labelled as significant statements. The next step involved grouping the labels into higher order themes, and condensing the content of categories that shared connections or overlaps. As a result, three main boundary challenges were derived: Emotional spillover, Temporal spillover and Simultaneous expectations. These themes were broad, but at the same time specific enough to capture the various scenarios experienced by remote workers (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 392). At this time, all three authors met and revised the themes. During this phase, the excerpts that supported each theme were re-examined meticulously to ensure the consistency of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The occurrences within each theme were quantified to gain insights into their frequency and scope, and content matching the pre-determined FSSB-categories was also identified. The emerging challenges and forms of support were then compared (Robinson, 2011), and the connections between them were examined by interpreting the narratives of individuals in terms of challenges and forms of support. When participants described challenges and then explained how they overcame these challenges, a link could be established to the forms of support that alleviated the challenge. The data was further categorized based on participants' parental and spousal status, highlighting specific challenges and forms of support within different groups. (See Fig. 1.)

4. Findings

The study reveals that remote work blurs boundaries in two directions: 1) work interfering with non-work roles through emotional and temporal spillovers, mitigated by the supervisor's help in safeguarding the boundary; and 2) non-work interfering with work roles through simultaneous role expectations, mitigated by the supervisor's help to maintain boundary flexibility. The study also reveals differences in regard to the parental status of the interviewees: parent employees require flexible boundaries to attend to family responsibilities, while non-parents need safeguards to maintain boundaries. The observed similarities and differences between the groups are shown in Table 1, and are discussed into more detail in the following sections.

4.1. Interference of work in the non-work domain

This first theme, *interference of work in the non-work domain* highlights individual struggles with work spilling over into their non-work domain. Its sub-theme *emotional spillover* refers to the carry-over of emotions such as stress, worries, and tiredness from work to non-work hours, and is often associated with work-related tasks or interpersonal dynamics. The sub-theme *temporal spillover* involves the continuation of work engagement into non-work hours, intruding on time designated for non-work activities and potentially reducing one's investment in non-work pursuits.

4.1.1. Emotional spill-over

When working remotely, there were various situations in which issues that occurred during the workday were bothering people during non-work time. This caused an inability for them to transfer from work to non-work roles. Encountered issues during the workday would emotionally trouble employees even after the workday had finished. Remote working eliminated the opportunities for spontaneous dialogues that typically occurred in office settings, such as conversations in corridors, at desks, and in the office canteen. As a result, employees were unable to release their emotional burdens through sharing experiences and engaging in supportive discussions with colleagues. Interviewees with reduced access to such support expressed their heightened need for *work rumination in the non-work time* about work-related issues.

"There are situations where there is too much work. Some unpleasant things at work that weigh on your mind, they tend to come along even into the weekend. Then, on Monday morning it feels like you haven't fully recovered and those things have been on your mind, so then you haven't been able to find that balance."

(Female, 53, lives alone)

Some employees who had a spouse admitted that they had begun to increasingly seek social support from the family. They mentioned they had begun to discuss (and ruminate) work issues with their spouses, more than previously. Although spouses might offer a channel for social interaction and support, the interviewees felt that unloading work-related worries onto loved ones meant that work spilled over into their non-work life. This placed a *burden on the spouse from work*, which served as a substitute for the missed office interactions.

"Compared to office hours, I tend to discuss work-related matters with my spouse a lot more. Perhaps it's a way for me to process the things that are on my mind about work. I don't know if it bothers my wife that I unload things to her." (Male, 33, lives with spouse and children).

Although there were no specific differences between parenting and non-parenting employees, it is important to note that employees who lived in single person households without the possibility to talk things out with partners were most likely to express a specific need to engage in informal dialogue with their supervisor. This was mainly in order to deal with difficult issues, which also extended to matters related to their personal life. The role of such emotional support seemed to serve as a protective mechanism towards employees' non-work time by helping the employee sufficiently manage negative encounters at work, and enabled them to transfer to their non-work role after the workday.

With its reliance on digital correspondence, remote work seemed to create a potential mechanism for emotionally burdensome events due to increased misinterpretations and conflicts, with limited opportunities for resolution or addressing these issues. With reduced opportunities to offload difficult experiences (e.g., in the custom of informal between-peer interaction), issues would persist in bothering participants' minds. Consequently, the stress caused by unresolved conflict influenced the likelihood for spill-over into one's private life.

"I have experienced negative things more strongly in remote work than in the workplace where I have had close relationships with colleagues. The feeling of failure comes easier, and it tends to linger longer as well. When you're in proximity with colleagues, it's easier to get immediate support when something negative happens. But with remote work, you don't want to interrupt your colleagues' work by sharing your negative experience, and it can be more challenging to get the support you need. I usually take it up with my supervisor and tell her about it."

(Female, 49, lives with a spouse)

"It's the most mentally challenging thing when we work alone [remotely] and something happens, which makes one angry. Earlier today, there was sort of a 'situation' with my colleagues where my supervisor was also present. This situation wasn't direct criticism, but it started bothering me. I immediately sent my boss a message on Teams asking for his perspective on what was said because I wanted to know where the problem was and where I stood."

(Male, 53, lives with a spouse)

It became a clear focal point that the role of supervisor support when managing boundaries became blurred because of mental spillover. The leader's willingness to offer *emotional support* was essential. The leader offered the possibility to handle work-related issues during the workday and helped subordinates maintain the issues within that role. One obvious need was to emotionally unload work-related worries and gain support to resolve matters.

"My supervisor is the kind of person you can talk to about anything. If some work stuff is bothering you, you can vent it to her and tell her, 'this really bugs me' [...] In remote working, you can rant freely since no one else hears you. Every now and then we talk about more personal stuff. Sometimes we might take the phone with us for a 15-minute walk and deliberately not talk about work. It's a possibility for unwinding and a way to reset your mind."

(Female, 31, lives alone)

The need for dialogue and support extended to encouragement and help when encountering difficulties or setbacks, which seemed an important aspect for managing emotional spillovers.

"I appreciate it that we go through negative things together [with my supervisor]. If something has gone wrong, we consider why and how it can be done differently when going forward. We also discuss if it's worth being worried about personally."

(Female, 29, lives with a spouse)

The perception of supervisors was that their role had changed during the period of intensive remote working. The nature of their work and what they felt was expected of them leaned more towards soft values and focusing on the non-work domain of their employees more intensively.

From a supervisor interview: "Sometimes it feels like I'm a psychologist. We discuss life challenges, and employees need me for conversation and support, empathy, and understanding. If there are issues with results not progressing, I provide help, support, and understanding."

(Female, 47, lives with spouse and children)

Thus, during the pandemic there has been a tendency for supervisors to take on more responsibility for employees during non-work hours, and also in regard to their personal issues. Ironically, this shift in the interpersonal role of supervisors has often been seen as a necessity to aid employees in establishing work-nonwork boundaries. In times of remote work, employees have faced challenging situations, whether work-related, communication-related (digital technology adding fuel to the fire), or regarding team dynamics and chemistry. In order to ease the effects of mental spillover, supervisors have been seen as a crucial factor in relieving employees of anxiety and mediating tensions to enable work recovery.

4.1.2. Temporal spill-over

Experiences of temporal spill-over were observed, and they manifested as *extended availability* and *increased workloads*. The right to disconnect from work, whether via phone, email, or messaging, seemed to disappear. Rather, there was a sense among the participants that they were always to be reachable. Within this theme, there seemed to be a heightened tendency for such spillovers among the non-parents, who did not have compelling non-work obligations (family chores) to interrupt work. It was observed that specifically interviewees who lived in single-person households expressed the shift to remote working as "*work taking over all life*", as work was now "*literally carried home*". These participants feared that they would not be able to separate work from home, particularly as the home now reminded them of work-related matters.

"The difference [now in remote working] is that my computer is basically always on. I never used to keep my computer on standby and I would reply [to e-mails] in the morning. But now that the computer is always available, it's so easy to quickly respond to something. I keep checking my phone to see if there are any urgent messages, and I work a little bit in the evenings."

(Male, 50, lives with a spouse)

"Letting go of work has been a significant challenge for me. The hardest part is leaving work and work-related thoughts behind at the end of the day. Because technically, when your free-time starts, you're still in the same place, so it's challenging to detach your thoughts from work."

(Male, 32, lives alone)

It seems that remote working changes the way work and being at work is comprehended. The interviewees perceived tasks related work spilling over to non-work time, which made the detachment less easy. One mechanism causing temporal spillover might be the changed perception of employees about working hours. Occasionally this meant taking longer recovery breaks from work. It also meant working late hours, and it seems that establishing and maintaining a structured work routine was sometimes hard.

"I notice that my work tends to stretch out. Now that you're at home, it's easy to think 'I'll just do this one more thing', and then the day stretches and drags on."

(Female, 28, lives alone)

Therefore, it seems that in addition to the mental aspects of tasks piling up after the workday, the temporal boundaries were also harder to maintain. Employees living with children experienced children as helping them to set boundaries between work and non-

work domains, but the employees who did not have children were easily stretching that boundary. Many interviewees expressed their concern of *increased workload*, and blurred work times that entailed working around the clock.

“My workload has increased significantly [...], the boundary between free-time and work has been very blurry. I worked into the evening, so it was difficult to disconnect from that situation. There was always so much work to do, and at some point, you just have to close the laptop and start doing other things.”

(Male, 53, lives with a spouse)

Many of the non-parenting interviewees had realized that the way they were working was not sustainable in terms of their own wellbeing. They had started to structure their workdays and plan, for example, when to take breaks. However, this seemed to be difficult and to even cause ethical pondering and feelings of guilt about taking even necessary breaks. Especially, it seems that participants who lived without children or a spouse were struggling to manage their work schedules.

“It was a big change overall to work from home. At first, I worked longer days because it took some getting used to working on a laptop at home. It took several months to get used to the idea of closing the laptop and having free-time after work.”

(Female, 30, lives alone)

“I don't have children or any childcare-related issues, all I have to do is manage my own time and keep my own wellbeing at the forefront. This is something I've been thinking about a lot lately: what would happen if I took those breaks? The legal ten-minute breaks in the morning and afternoon [which I am entitled to take]? What would it do to my salary, would it be okay?”

(Female, 48, lives alone)

Interestingly, the justification for going “*the extra mile*” in addition to working the extra hours seems to be perceived as a more acceptable choice in the participants' minds than simply doing the standard workday. It seems that although the border between the workday and leisure time is blurred, the expectations towards employees and how they should work is not completely clear. Some interviewees expressed a perceived pressure to prove they were working intensively.

“It was difficult to separate work time from my own time, and it was easy to spend a couple of extra hours at the end of the day working on just one more thing [...] nowadays, well, I cheat a bit. I do open my computer at 6:30 in the morning, but I don't actually do any work.”

(Male, 57, lives with a spouse)

Again, parenting obligations seemed to serve as a buffer against temporal slippage in remote work, and individuals without such obligations may be more susceptible to such slippage.

“Since remote working started, I have found myself working unnecessarily long days and on weekends because my workplace is nearby. I have found myself getting tired and stressed, but I've been able to discuss this with my supervisor. In my case, maintaining a work-life balance should be easy because I don't have to share my time with anyone at home. But then again, I wouldn't be working this way if I had a family.”

(Female, 57, lives alone)

Interviewees expressed their need for support from the supervisor to prioritize work tasks and help reduce their workload, while creating a work routine that included breaks and boundaries. It seems that the supportive behaviours that the employees needed from their supervisor were especially related to *role model behaviours* and *instrumental support* (Pensar & Rousi, 2023).

Within a context in which the temporal aspect of work blurred the boundaries of non-parenting employees, it was important that the supervisor expressed role modelling behaviours for sufficient boundary principles. Interestingly, this seemed to be challenging for supervisors, although many of them recognized this need. Although career position or role salience was not a specific focus of this study, it was observed (ironically but not surprisingly) that supervisors were struggling to maintain firm boundaries between work and non-work domains themselves. However, they recognized the conflict as they saw themselves as important role models in mitigating employees' temporal spillovers.

From a supervisor interview: “Leading by example is a way for me to demonstrate my expectations to my team. If I demand certain things from my team, I can't just do as I please. I always strive to do things myself that I expect my team to do. I must lead my team by example [...] I realize that this is not just a couple of weeks of remote work, but rather a long-term situation. The main reason for changing my own behaviour was to set an example for my team.”

(Female, 40, lives with spouse and children)

Nevertheless, some supervisors felt that being in a leading position required temporal stretching, and while they recognized that they are setting an example, it proved rather hard for them to follow their own guidelines.

From a supervisor interview: “I experience my supervisor job as a lifestyle. I'm not a supervisor only from 8 to 4, but rather all the time. I want to be there for my people, no matter the time. I don't feel stressed if someone sends me a message in the evening asking if they can call and talk. They may always call me [...] Many people say that even a supervisor needs to have time to put the phone down and disconnect from work. This lifestyle may not be suitable for everyone [...] I love this work and I do it my way.”

(Female, 47, lives with spouse and children)

In addition to the importance of supervisors as role models, it seems that the supervisor has an important role in helping employees maintain clear boundaries between work and non-work domains by providing instrumental support.

“The challenge is to make sure that work doesn't take up too much space [...] My supervisor has been guiding me in this direction from the beginning, particularly with regards to scheduling and organizing. [...] My supervisor has played a really important role in helping me learn how to do this [...]. She has helped by emphasizing the importance of taking breaks and doing small things to refresh.”

(Female, 26, lives alone)

Some interviewees highlighted the importance of having the courage to draw the line for working to prioritize their non-work needs and activities, such as intentionally delaying task completion until the next day, as a means of protecting their non-work roles. Here, supervisors seemed to play a key role in explicitly communicating and verbalizing that such prioritizations and decisions are acceptable. Therefore, a verbal investment in the remote context was deemed to be essential in acknowledging and normalizing the idea of a temporal boundary.

“I've noticed that remote work can lead to work taking over, and I think my manager has also paid more attention to this. My supervisor strongly encourages that everyone can work a normal workday [and not more] without feeling guilty. She always remembers to follow up and asks: ‘Have you accumulated too many extra hours, have you remembered to take time off?’”

(Female, 53, lives alone)

Temporal spillovers were noted to be the result of having too many tasks with not enough time during the day to complete them, for example, due to meetings. This places additional challenges on individuals who serve as supervisors, in that their role in supporting employees entails the accrual of more responsibilities, such as interacting in non-work hours while attempting to still demonstrate healthy boundary management.

To conclude, parenting and non-parenting employees were affected by emotional and temporal spillovers. However, when considering work intruding on the non-work domain of one's life, non-parenting employees were more prone to experience the spillover, and being a parent serves a buffer against such spillover. Interestingly, people in supervisory positions did not experience the same effect. The position of a supervisor includes requirements (at least in the minds of the supervisors) to stretch their boundaries and to be available regardless of their parental status. Thus, this presents an aspect that deserves more scholarly attention in future research.

4.2. Interference of non-work in the work domain

The second theme *interference of non-work in the work domain* manifests in challenges to switch between the two roles at times where such role transitions would be otherwise unusual, i.e. during working hours. This led to a constant negotiation of simultaneous role expectations occurring simultaneously in both domains.

4.2.1. Simultaneous role expectations during working hours

Due to remote work being conducted in the home environment, it was evident that the nature of the work rendered work and non-work roles inseparable. This was particularly noticeable among parenting employees, who faced expectations from their children who were present regardless of whether they were working or not. The situation had been especially demanding in some phases of the extraordinary pandemic situation when schools and daycare centres had been temporarily closed. Those times had obligated parents to help the children with schoolwork and to cook meals during the workday. However, some of the juggling had continued after the lockdown, as parents were still working remotely and children at school age would still arrive home at times when parents were expected to work. Despite what might be expected, most parents felt that the home-working arrangement offered an advantage for maintaining better parenting roles in regard to feeling present and involved as a family member. However, there was still a pressure to engage in family matters during working hours. Particularly, parents needed to frequently shift their attention from work-related tasks to family-related tasks, which increased their cognitive load and resulted in greater temporal spillover as they had to catch up on lost work time during the night.

Thus, simultaneous role expectations manifested in *frequent boundary transitions*. As mentioned, many parents felt that working from home was a positive development from the parenting perspective, since it increased family proximity and helped them to manage daily chores in a more effective manner. Also, quick micro-transitions between work and family roles during the day (e.g., cooking lunch, helping children with homework) gave needed breaks from work and increased energy levels.

“In the morning, there is no rush to put on makeup and leave quickly. Time is saved and it goes to the children. At the breakfast table, you can spend more time with the children. You can be more present for the children, they can come and say hi or they know that mom is still at home”

(Female, 43, lives with children)

“When there's a moment without meetings, I might work in the living room, chat with my spouse, and sometimes kiss my child, and it all comes together, combining family and work. [...] Being able to be present with my family during the workday is a motivator for me.”

(Male, 31, lives with spouse and children)

It was observed that these positive experiences occurred when parents felt they had sufficient flexibility for managing the micro-transitions between their work and family responsibilities during office hours. In these situations, parents perceived supervisor support, which included permission, trust, and agreed-upon practices, as enabling them to shape their routines around micro-transitions.

“[Working from home] does allow me to be here at home. I can make lunch for my child who comes home from school. I can follow his life more closely, because he is a teenager, and I can control things better when I am at home.”

(Female, 45, lives with spouse and children)

“It's great that I can work remotely and [...] my supervisors trust that I can get the job done even though I'm not physically in the office. Whenever there's some spare time, I can empty the dishwasher or hang up the laundry.”

(Male, 38, lives with spouse and children)

“My supervisor understands the challenges of balancing work and family. I don't report to her every day about taking my child to preschool at a certain time and being back at a certain time, but they trust that I will handle the tasks regardless of how many interruptions I may face.”

(Female, 40, lives with spouse and children)

As employees faced challenges with simultaneous role expectations, the support from leaders was crucial. This support included verbalizing flexibility, trust, and autonomy, allowing employees to have control over their work arrangements. Supervisors themselves also emphasized the importance of knowing their employees, in order to be able to offer the type of instrumental support they needed.

From a supervisor interview: “We follow up work based on the progress and results. My team members will tell if they face a challenge and let me know how it impacts the schedules or if they cannot be overcome. My monitoring is based on trust to a large extent, but as a supervisor, I also need to track progress and lead the team. [...] However, [in remote work] I need to give them more leeway, allowing people to work in their own way. If something comes up and they can't work in the morning, then maybe they'll do the work in the evening. I need to give even more freedom and trust to my team members.”

(Male, 48, lives with spouse and children)

From a supervisor interview: “We've made various arrangements for team members who have young children, such as providing them with more time off and flexible work hours. [...] I hope that these types of actions demonstrate my concern for their wellbeing and help them maintain reasonable stress levels. I know my team and each individual well enough that even if they write something in a chat, I can tell a lot from that [...] I combine their workloads, projects, ticket volumes, and schedules to ensure they don't get overwhelmed.”

(Female, 40, lives with spouse and children)

Frequent and routine role transitions could be managed through instrumental support. However, simultaneous role expectations sometimes arose unexpectedly. This management of unexpected non-work demands is known as *unexpected and acute role transitions (ad-hoc)*, which employees cannot predict or prevent. In these situations, the interviewees felt that they were conflicted between two roles and unable to integrate the roles at those moments. These situations differed from planned routines because employees had no control over them. While planned role transitions generated positive experiences, sudden role demands led to guilt and stress about failing in both domains. Thus, a need emerged among parents to be able to attend these matters without being worried about work consequences.

“I usually have to take a break when my boys come home from school. Otherwise, they come to my door and make a lot of noise and hassle.”

(Female, 45, lives with spouse and children)

“My son just came by [my workplace] to talk to me, but it doesn't bother me in any way since this [the interview] is more of an informal discussion or conversation. But if I now had to train [my customers] or explain something to them and someone [from home] started chatting in the middle, then my brain just wouldn't work properly.”

(Male, 45, lives with spouse and children)

“If I need to take care of my children during the day or use some time for them, no one says anything negative [...]. No-one monitors when I'm at the computer. It's enough that I do my own work.”

(Male, 31, lives with spouse and children)

In the remote working context where teamwork was scattered, many participants explained they were increasingly reliant on supervisor help. In particular, participants mentioned that their supervisor's ability to create a safe atmosphere in the team was important. This meant that sudden absences or changes in work shifts and responsibilities would be solved together. These can be seen as *creative work-family management solutions*.

From a supervisor interview: “We have been searching for a model on how to make this remote-working work for everyone, as it has been new for everyone. One needs to be able to make quick changes and be a bit more creative in different situations, perhaps in a different way than if we were always face-to-face.”

(Female, 40, lives with spouse and children)

From a supervisor interview: “Some people [in our organization] who are working at home have agreed with other people living in the same household to have their own [uninterrupted] time. [Similarly], they inform the rest of the team [at work] that at this specific time, they will need to keep an eye on their children or something else [at home]. We all know not to schedule any important discussions during that time.”

(Male, 39, lives with a spouse)

Although the emotional and temporal spillovers were also emphasized by employees that were non-parenting or had no spouse, the spillovers from home to work leant firmly towards those with parental responsibilities. Interestingly, it seems that gender did not play a role in the findings, and fathers and mothers had similar experiences regarding this matter. However, the spillover from home to work did not seem as negative as the work to home experiences. Rather, the home to work spillover was expressed as an opportunity to attend to family needs during work hours.

5. Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine the types of boundary challenges faced by employees with different parental status when working remotely. Additionally, the work explored how leaders can provide support for employees to mitigate boundary challenges through a demonstration of family supportive behaviours. The findings suggest that remote workers face emotional and temporal demand spillover from their work roles to non-work roles. This is coupled by simultaneous role demands within times where employees are expected to work. The study further suggests that boundary challenges manifest differently for parents and non-parents, but both groups benefit from supervisor's family supportive behaviours. Accordingly, the knowledge produced in this study makes several theoretical and practical contributions.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

As the first contribution, the present study broadens the discourse on the work-nonwork interface beyond the conservative view of the family (limited to parents and children) and challenges the dominant narrow focus on work and family reconciliation (Kelliher et al., 2019). In the present study, the complexities of managing work-nonwork boundaries for employees with varying parental status are accounted for via a more inclusive approach. The approach highlights the nuances between the challenges of parents and non-parents. Surprisingly, the findings indicate that non-parents generally experience more negative boundary blurring, while parents view the opportunity to be with family as a positive experience. This contrasts with previous research (Reimann et al., 2022; Schieman et al., 2021), and in particular, non-parenting employees living alone seem to face heightened isolation and thus a lack of emotional support in remote work. However, it is important to consider the special circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, as feelings of isolation have been commonly reported across adult populations living on their own during that time (Chen et al., 2023; Kottmann & Dales, 2023). Nevertheless, as remote and hybrid working arrangements are still widely spread, feelings of loneliness and isolation might be a reality for some employees to this day.

In contrast to this finding, non-parenting employees living with spouses describe an increased use of spousal support (and even bother to the spouse) in the home-working situation. In both situations, there appears to be a greater tendency for increased emotional workload and spillover from work to home than previously when work was not performed at home in the presence of a spouse or in isolation. Especially in these situations, the support provided by the supervisor was seen as essential. Previous research has suggested that family may be serving as a protective factor for parents in creating thicker boundaries and so preventing temporal spillover (Lawson et al., 2013; Santos, 2015). The findings of this study were consistent with this notion, suggesting that non-parents have a greater need for boundary protection. Logically, it can be expected that other non-work factors such as hobbies and leisure obligations, and the tactics practiced by individuals, can also serve as effective boundary controls (Allen et al., 2021). However, in the extraordinary pandemic situation examined in this study, these factors were eliminated. This likely highlights the differences between groups and also the effects of isolation.

The second contribution of this study is by advancing the understanding of the mechanisms that lead to boundary blurring in remote work. While previous research has acknowledged the occurrence of temporal and physical blurring in the home-working situation (Adisa et al., 2022), this study suggests that in addition to temporal blurring, emotional factors and contextual role expectations also contribute to boundary blurring. In the remote work context, there seems to be an elevated tendency for emotional spillovers, slightly emphasized for non-parenting employees, where stress, negative emotions, and pressures from work are transferred to the non-work domain (Grzywacz, 2000). This phenomenon is likely to be exacerbated by reduced access to social support (Kalttinen & Hakanen, 2023; Wang et al., 2021) compared to that provided in the traditional office setting where peers work closely with one another. Negative work events potentially expose individuals to the continuation and carryover of stress into leisure time if these events are not sufficiently addressed by providing support. The findings regarding the simultaneous juggling of role expectations and work responsibilities are partially consistent with suggestions offered by previous literature (Allen et al., 2015). However, they differ in that the interference between work and non-work domains may not always be viewed as negative. This is particularly so if employees perceive sufficient support in managing both roles concurrently, and if the work-nonwork boundary is perceived as being flexible. This perception could be attributed to the maintenance of control in boundary management (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012), where regular and ad-hoc expectations do not induce stress. Therefore, it is likely that adequately supported flexibility even contributes to a positive experience of family bonding (Chu et al., 2021).

Additionally, it is important to note that there are context and role dependencies in experienced boundary challenges. Thus,

straightforward assumptions about differences in flexibility between parents and non-parents should be approached with caution, and other factors should be accounted for, such as role salience (Niemistö et al., 2020; Pedersen & Jeppesen, 2012). Interestingly, this study indicates that parenting supervisors exhibited a greater inclination to maintain more permeable boundaries compared to their employees. The supervisors attributed this to the high integration of their roles, which facilitated their ability to fulfil their supervisory responsibilities. This kind of behaviour of supervisors could have an impact on employee boundary blurring (Pan et al., 2021). The findings of this study provided indications that in addition to self-induced temporal spill-over, some remote workers experienced pressure from the organization to engage in boundary blurring. Interestingly, when considering the perspectives of parents and non-parents, there is a risk that this pressure may affect non-parents more, as they may not have compelling reasons (such as family obligations) to resist these expectations. Future research should therefore further investigate the impact of supervisor boundary preferences and role modelling on the soundness of employees' boundaries.

Although a comparison in boundary challenges between genders was not a focus of this study, the research data was rich in terms of representing remote workers with varying parental status. In this data consisting of Finnish employees, gender differences did not come across as striking. Maintaining boundaries between work and other aspects of life was a concern for all participants, regardless of them being mothers, fathers, or non-parents. Fathers and mothers faced similar challenges in managing family responsibilities alongside their work roles during remote working days, and a need to accommodate continuous and sudden role transitions and a need for flexibility was present in both genders. However, it should be noted that the Finnish family context is characterized by gender equality in the division of housework and caring for children, and fathers typically take on a larger role in household responsibilities compared to other countries (Eurostat, 2021).

As a third contribution, the present study emphasizes the significance of work-life support in facilitating successful boundary challenges, rather than solely viewing them as a product of an individual's ability to manage boundaries. Boundary maintenance, however, is often regarded as an individual's own initiative (Shirmohammadi et al., 2023). The results of the study strengthen the notion that when working remotely, the individual needs external support to maintain and manage boundaries. Previous research has not addressed FSSB as a preventive measure for boundary blurring. This study proposes that instrumental support is pivotal in strengthening temporal boundaries, for example, by preventing workload increases or any expectations of stretching working hours. Furthermore, the role modelling behaviour of supervisors is emphasized, as they align their own boundary practices with the perspectives of employees. It is likely that supervisors who exhibit segmentation behaviour and prevent or limit their own boundary permeability can contribute to employees perceiving work-life friendly behaviours and minimize the potential for boundary permeability among employees (Koch & Binnewies, 2015). Although it was not the focus of our study, the findings indicate that supervisors' perceptions of remote work had changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this shift in attitude was actually seen as a form of support, leading to an improved perception of their supervisors' support (Pensar & Rousi, 2023).

Moreover, the results indicate that the support needed varies between employees with different parental status. Instrumental and creative work-family management support is particularly beneficial for parents in remote work situations, as they must establish routines to manage overlapping roles without experiencing stress or pressure. One key finding in this study is the importance of emotional support in preventing emotional spillovers, especially for non-parenting employees (living alone or with a spouse). This specifically means that efforts are made to mitigate emotionally demanding factors in work, in order to prevent them from lingering during role transitions. Importantly, it was found that the FSSB framework that traditionally focused on the work-family interface should be extended to include other non-work roles beyond the traditional family, and rather than family supportive, it is seen as a demonstration of work-life friendly behaviours or non-work supportiveness. It is important to note that the context of COVID-19 has been highly exceptional, reshaping prevailing work patterns and subjecting people to unprecedented situations. This may have shifted their overall boundary preferences. For instance, working amidst children could be an entirely new situation for parents, and their experiences might even be positive due to their evolving boundary preferences. Therefore, it would be intriguing to further investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic may have potentially altered boundary preferences in this context.

The importance of considering the impact of work on various life domains, and the need for tailored supportive strategies was highlighted in this research. To conclude, within the context of remote work, emotional and role modelling behaviours of supervisors were particularly important for non-parenting individuals, while employees with parenting responsibilities benefited from instrumental support and creative family practices. The accessibility of supervisors and their verbal investment in providing support were emphasized in the context of remote work. This research highlights the significance of verbal investment and low-barrier supervisor availability within supervisor support, complementing previous studies on the dimensions of FSSB in remote work settings (Thomas et al., 2022).

5.2. Limitations and future research

Despite the unusually extensive qualitative data, the biggest limitation of this study is that it was conducted in a narrow context, with only Finnish corporate employees participating in the study. Their job duties were typically office-based white-collar work. They did not have job-specific tasks, although some had time-bound tasks (such as customer service). No shift workers were represented in the study. Therefore, this study provides just one view of the boundary challenges faced by remote workers. It is likely that research conducted in other professions or in other countries would produce different results. These observations also naturally reflect the Nordic culture, where typically there is a high level of gender equality and household chores are distributed more evenly between parents (Eurostat, 2021). Therefore, it is important to extend this line of research in different country contexts, and further work is needed to study the support that may mitigate the challenges of blurring boundaries in remote work. Another significant limitation is the COVID-19 context. This study was conducted during a time of crisis, when there was an exceptional situation leading to enforced

remote work, irrespective of employees' life situations. Additionally, schools and childcare centres were temporarily closed, and restrictions on gatherings and disruptions to hobbies were in effect. Work-related travel was also temporarily halted. The abrupt shift to widespread remote work introduced new ways of working (e.g. adopting new tools) and could have potentially resulted in increased workloads for employees (Carillo et al., 2021). There is therefore the possibility that these factors may have distorted our results, impacting aspects such as the extent of parental involvement in household chores. On one hand, the exaggerated presence at home could have been influential, but on the other hand, the constraints imposed on work and leisure activities in this unique situation may have influenced the findings that emerged.

As a further consequence of the pandemic, work commutes were temporarily suspended, which may have improved parents' abilities to share household chores more equally. However, the opportunities for social encounters for single individuals were limited to those outside work, which is why, for example, their need for emotional support may have been overemphasized. Overall, COVID-19 is likely to have caused concern for loved ones, making the need for emotional support significant. A final, but significant limitation of this study is that interviews were not repeated after the pandemic had ended, since it was not possible to appreciate the duration of the pandemic, and thus no agreement of the follow-up interview was made with the participants. Therefore, the findings are related to the mid-stage of the pandemic. An intriguing perspective for further research would be to examine how boundaries have evolved since the possibility of returning to the office, or as remote work continues on a voluntary and partial basis. Further research should also be conducted on hybrid work, where remote work is not so intensive or imposed. However, we have reason to believe that the same issues raised by our study will also arise in general regarding flexible work and work that separates people in different locations. Moreover, the data revealed variations in the level of support provided by supervisors, including instances where support was lacking due to factors such as the supervisor's busyness, characteristics, preferences, or geographical distance. In the future, it would be intriguing to examine the effects of this absence of support on an employee's ability to maintain boundaries. We also encourage scholars to conduct longitudinal studies to explore the long-term effects of FSSB on work-nonwork boundary maintenance and employee wellbeing. Our main recommendation for future research in this context is to further investigate the forms of verbal investment, and how they affect perceived support. Additionally, the analysis of the data resulted a hypothesized model of the relations between perceived boundary challenges and the FSSB-dimensions in remote work. This model should be tested in future studies to acquire a more in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon, and for example, to test the connections between different variables.

5.3. Practical recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the necessity of tailoring support for employees' work-life interface based on their individual life situations, namely, family and parental status. In the context of remote work, family responsibilities during work hours become particularly significant, necessitating flexibility from employers. The challenges posed by time-independent work highlight the need for well-defined boundaries, as remote work's fluid nature can create difficulties for some individuals. Navigating these varied needs requires sustained organizational dialogue. First and foremost, remote workers should be encouraged to recognize their own boundary requirements and communicate them effectively. There should also be a level of acknowledgement that their colleagues may have very different needs, and thus avoid inadvertently encroaching on others' boundaries. Secondly, supervisors play a vital role in fostering open communication with employees, and should thus strive to understand each employee's unique circumstances. For remote workers with families, the ability to integrate daily tasks with work and adjust their schedules accordingly may be crucial. Conversely, those living alone might seek social connection within the work community during traditional working hours. Supervisors should also recognize that their own preferences may not always match those of their employees, and should be ready to adjust their support accordingly. This adaptation can only occur effectively through an ongoing dialogue about the various needs and preferences that exist within the larger group. Thirdly, at an organizational level, discussions should address how to approach time-independent work without compromising employees' personal time or inadvertently extending their work hours. Colleagues working closely together should establish shared principles aimed at safeguarding boundaries. Such principles might encompass agreements concerning the timing of work-related correspondence within designated timeframes, transparent communication of individual work hours, and mutual understandings about availability. Fourthly, promoting continuous dialogue within the work community can effectively reduce emotional spillover. Establishing platforms for low-threshold communication and setting aside designated times for contact can be advantageous. Encouraging informal discussions through methods like employee pairs or small discussion groups can also prove helpful. Integrating routine practices such as allocating time for informal dialogue alongside formal meetings, further enhances this approach. At the leadership level, promoting an empowering culture that allows for adaptable support is crucial. Human Resource (HR) leadership can establish shared principles, guidelines, standards and culture, ensuring that every employee has the opportunity to discuss their work-life interface management needs and feel that their individual circumstances are considered. These discussions can seamlessly become part of day-to-day interactions.

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Participating organizations

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Hilpi Kangas: Conceptualization, Validation, Formal analysis, Resources, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Heini Pensar:** Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Software, Resources, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Rebekah Rousi:** Validation, Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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Clarification of usage of artificial intelligent

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Chat GPT in order to improve the language and clarity of the manuscript. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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