

Toward a Dynamic Understanding of Work–Family Boundary Management: A Control Theory Perspective

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Boundary theory posits boundary management tactics as specific behaviors. Yet, little is known about whether and why individuals use these tactics variably. Incorporating control theory and boundary theory, we conceptualized boundary management tactics intended to segment work from family (BMT) as dynamic, goal-directed behaviors adopted in response to a perceived work–family discrepancy (i.e., work-to-family conflict). Using 10-week weekly diary data ($N = 247$), we examined within-person variation in the use of multidimensional BMT to determine whether increased work-to-family conflict prompts greater future use of BMT and whether BMT subsequently relate to less work-to-family conflict. Aligned with theory, we found substantial within-person variability in BMT (31%). Physical, technological, and temporal tactics were used more often and in a relatively more routinized way than communication tactics. Results revealed that strain-based work-to-family conflict related to greater future use of temporal and physical tactics, with the strongest effect across a 1-week interval. Unexpectedly, overall BMT did not relate to later time- and strain-based work-to-family conflict, and temporal tactics related to more time-based work-to-family conflict in following weeks. This study offers more nuanced knowledge about the dynamic use of multidimensional BMT and lays a foundation for further research to advance a process-oriented understanding of work–family boundary management.

Keywords: work–family boundary management tactics, boundary theory, work–family conflict, continuous time structural equation modeling, weekly diary study

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Due to changing work circumstances and the increasing use of flexible work arrangements that blur boundaries around work and family, navigating the work–family interface has become more challenging than ever. In light of the frequent encroachment of the work role on the family role and its adverse consequences for individuals and their families (Amstad et al., 2011), how workers manage role boundaries has received much research attention. In this regard, a growing body of research suggests that individuals engage in specific behaviors (i.e., work–family boundary management tactics; Kossek et al., 2006; Kreiner et al., 2009) to segment their work from their

family roles (Ashforth et al., 2000) in an effort to avoid work-to-family conflict (i.e., a type of interrole conflict that occurs when work demands make it difficult to meet family demands; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Despite the growing literature, the current understanding of work–family boundary management is limited in several regards. First, a key tenet of boundary theory is that individuals create and maintain boundaries to organize their world and to reduce interrole conflict (Ashforth et al., 2000, Nippert-Eng, 1996). Extant theory (Kreiner et al., 2009) and empirical studies (e.g., Kubicek & Tement, 2016) are predicated on the view that work–family boundary management

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tactics are preemptively enacted to avoid work–family conflict. Yet, boundary theory notes that boundary management is an active, ongoing process that involves interaction and practices that evolve over time. Second, although boundary management tactics are conceptualized as specific behaviors rather than as stable individual differences (Kreiner et al., 2009), previous research has primarily focused on average levels of tactic use over a nonspecified time frame (e.g., Carlson et al., 2016; Park & Jex, 2011). This limitation is important in that individuals likely use tactics in a fluctuating manner. Understanding such variation requires examination of boundary management tactics as behaviors rather than as stable attributes. Last, although qualitative research has repeatedly highlighted the multidimensional nature of boundary management tactics (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2009; Sturges, 2012), most research on boundary management has been based on a nondimensional measure of boundary enactment (e.g., Reinke & Gerlach, 2022; Wepfer et al., 2018) or has focused on technology use (e.g., Derks et al., 2016; see Carlson et al., 2016; Haun et al., 2022 as exceptions). Thus, our understanding of how different types of tactics may vary in their usage across time and in relationship with work–family outcomes is limited.

In light of the above limitations, the present weekly diary study aims to advance our understanding of the dynamic nature of multidimensional work–family boundary management. In contrast to the prevailing static research paradigm based on average boundary management, we theorize work–family boundary management is a process that changes *in response to* evolving work–family situations (Allen et al., 2019). Specifically, we incorporate control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982) and boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000, Kreiner et al., 2009) to conceptualize work–family BMT as goal-directed behaviors enacted in response to a perceived work–family discrepancy (i.e., work-to-family conflict). We examine within-person variation in the use of boundary management behaviors intended to segment work from family (referred to more simply from here forward as BMT) to determine whether BMT are used in response to work-to-family conflict, and whether BMT subsequently relate to less work-to-family conflict. We also explore whether observed patterns differ across the types of tactics (physical, temporal, communication, and technological tactics) and conflict (time- and strain-based) and the nature of the temporal characteristics of the reciprocal relationship between BMT and work-to-family conflict.

We make several important contributions to boundary management theory and research. First, guided by control theory, which postulates goal striving as a dynamic process (Carver & Scheier, 1982), we provide novel insight into the use of work–family BMT in relation to work-to-family conflict. Building on the notion of the discrepancy-reducing regulation loop in control theory, we examine whether tactics are used in a reactive manner (i.e., work-to-family conflict prompts tactic use). Our view of work-to-family conflict as a “predictor” of BMT use challenges the existing literature, in that previous research typically posits interrole conflict as an outcome of tactic use (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2009; Kubicek & Tement, 2016). As such, our approach extends recent theoretical developments in the literature that position work–family management in a broader self-regulatory context (e.g., Adkins & Premeaux, 2019; Hirschi et al., 2019, 2022), which emphasizes personal agency in pursuing an optimal work–family interface via careful monitoring and various actions.

Second, we advance the work–family literature by testing a reciprocal relationship between work–family BMT and work-to-family conflict, as it unfolds across time. In doing so, we answer the

call for research that better captures work–family boundary management as a dynamic process that changes amid evolving work and family situations (Allen et al., 2019). Moreover, our novel investigation adds to the limited knowledge base on the effectiveness of work–family BMT in reducing work-to-family conflict. To date, most studies examining BMT outcomes have used cross-sectional designs (e.g., Carlson et al., 2016; Haun et al., 2022; Kubicek & Tement, 2016) or a lagged design (Reinke & Gerlach, 2022). Given conclusions drawn from cross-sectional research do not necessarily hold in longitudinal research (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010), theoretical development requires that data more accurately reflect work–family processes as they occur (Schaie, 1988).

Third, we advance our understanding of work–family boundary management by considering four dimensions of BMT (physical, temporal, communication, and technological tactics). This is important as individuals may modify their use of specific tactics across time as they learn which tactics are more or less effective. Although we do not pose differential hypotheses given limited evidence to do so, taking a multidimensional perspective may help us gain more fine-grained information about work–family BMT. For instance, the dimensions may differ in terms of the degree of within-person changes (e.g., some groups of tactics may be more routinized or reactive to work–family situations than others) or their relationship with work-to-family conflict (e.g., some tactics may be more effective in reducing time-based conflict than strain-based conflict).

Fourth, we respond to the call for rigorous research on the temporal dynamics in organizational phenomena (e.g., Shipp & Cole, 2015). We examine work–family BMT and work-to-family conflict on a weekly basis. This is important in that role demands and work–family conflict can meaningfully vary from week-to-week (e.g., Peng et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2013). Moreover, the weekly interval was chosen for the present study in consideration that much of our work and family lives are calendared, organized, and occur at a weekly rhythm (Almeida & McDonald, 1998; Zerubavel, 1989), which provides a framework along which individuals may reflect and alter their boundary management practices. The weekly interval has also been recommended as an ideal for capturing various work–family processes that occur more slowly than over a day (Allen et al., 2019). Such a design with a relatively short interval (i.e., “shortitudinal” study; Dormann & Griffin, 2015) allows us to gain novel insights into the temporal order and direction of the relations between BMT and work-to-family conflict that cannot be revealed in cross-sectional studies. For instance, a negative relation between BMT and subsequent work–family conflict and a positive relation between work–family conflict and subsequent BMT may result in a null cross-sectional correlation between the two. Further, we explicitly consider the role of time by adopting continuous time structural equation modeling (CTSEM; Voelkle et al., 2012), which sheds light on the timing and duration of the theorized effects. In sum, our research advances boundary theory by providing an in-depth understanding of temporal dynamics.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

Boundary Management Theory

According to boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000, Nippert-Eng, 1996), boundaries both define entities and separate them

by setting physical, temporal, and/or psychological limits; these boundaries can vary on a continuum from highly segmenting (“thick” boundaries that are inflexible and impermeable) to highly integrating (“thin” boundaries that are flexible and permeable). Of importance, segmentation and integration both have unique costs and benefits (Ashforth et al., 2000). Highly segmenting boundaries help reduce blurring between roles, but role transitions tend to be more difficult. In contrast, highly integrating boundaries make role transitions easier, but confusion and interruptions are more likely due to blurred roles.

Boundary theory posits that people manage work–family boundaries in attempts to organize their world and reduce interrole conflicts (Ashforth et al., 2000), such as work-to-family conflict. Work-to-family conflict occurs when work demands make it difficult to successfully handle family demands (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In this study, we examine *time-based work-to-family conflict* (i.e., occurs when time devoted to the work role hinders the fulfillment of the family role expectations) and *strain-based work-to-family conflict* (i.e., occurs when strain generated in the work role inhibits effective performance in the family role); studies are often limited to the assessment of time and strain given known problems with the behavior-based dimension of work–family conflict (e.g., Min et al., 2021).

Boundary theory posits opposing possibilities concerning the role of boundary management in reducing interrole conflict. On the one hand, a segmentation approach was thought to reduce the likelihood of interrole conflict, because relatively clear and impermeable boundaries make cross-role interruptions less likely and allow individuals to thoroughly and exclusively immerse in the focal domain (Ashforth et al., 2000; Matthews et al., 2010). On the other hand, an integration approach to boundary management was thought to reduce interrole conflict, because flexible and permeable boundaries allow individuals to easily and seamlessly deal with cross-domain demands when necessary (Ashforth et al., 2000). Further complicating matters, the relationship between segmentation/integration with work–family conflict may depend on environmental and individual factors (Allen et al., 2014). Nonetheless, findings from cross-sectional studies have favored the idea that segmentation of work and family roles is associated with less work–family conflict (e.g., Danner-Vlaardingbroek et al., 2013; Kossek et al., 2012; Kubicek & Tement, 2016; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010).

Previous qualitative research identified various dimensions of BMT, with each dimension differing in the aspect of work–family boundaries that it targets (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2009; Sturges, 2012). Commonly identified dimensions include physical tactics (e.g., keeping separate calendars for work and family), temporal tactics (e.g., setting clear schedules for work and family), communication tactics (e.g., informing others about work–family boundary expectations), and technological tactics (e.g., avoiding the use of work-related gadgets at home). These studies also reported that individuals differ in the extent to which they use various tactics (Kreiner et al., 2009; Sturges, 2012), and cross-sectional research showed that the four dimensions of BMT have different relationships with outcomes (e.g., engagement, satisfaction; Carlson et al., 2016; Haun et al., 2022). However, little is known about whether individuals adopt various tactics over time or whether tactics differently relate to interrole conflict.

A Dynamic Approach to Multidimensional BMT

To theorize the dynamic use of multidimensional BMT, we draw on control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982). Control theory postulates a dynamic, continuous, and cyclic goal-striving process in which individuals engage in behaviors with a reference state in mind. According to control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982), individuals monitor their current state (i.e., an input function) and compare it (i.e., a comparator) to a desired state (i.e., a standard or a goal) to see if a discrepancy between the current state and a desired state exists. If an aversive discrepancy is identified, individuals engage in behaviors to reduce the discrepancy (i.e., an output function). As individuals react to eliminate detected discrepancies between the goal and the actual state, this mechanism is referred to as the “discrepancy-reducing regulation loop.”

In viewing work–family boundary management through a control theory lens, we theorize that “no/minimal work-to-family conflict” is a goal, because individuals generally desire to avoid unpleasant interrole conflict (Ashforth et al., 2000). We suggest the state of freedom from work–family conflict is a desirable goal individuals strive toward even if it may not always be viewed as attainable. In control theory terms, “the perception of work-to-family conflict” corresponds to an input function, which is compared against the standard of no/minimal work-to-family conflict. Perceived work-to-family conflict signifies an unpleasant discrepancy between an input function and the standard, which individuals would attempt to eliminate via an output function, such as “adopting BMT.” A recent study examining daily segmentation preferences found that individuals who experienced work strain preferred more segmentation of work from family (Mueller et al., 2023), which may reflect their attempts to regulate daily work strain and associated work-to-family conflict. Taken together, we theorize that individuals may increase their use of BMT in response to perceiving work-to-family conflict. Thus, we hypothesize a positive relationship between work-to-family conflict and future use of BMT.

Hypothesis 1: Work-to-family conflict (time-based and strain-based) predicts greater future use of BMT (physical, temporal, communication, and technological tactics).

Continuing the discrepancy-reducing regulation loop, control theory posits that the output function (i.e., behavior) changes the environment, thereby altering the input function (i.e., perception of the current status). Applied to the present study, BMT are expected to reduce work-to-family conflict, because compartmentalized roles are less likely to affect each other (Ashforth et al., 2000; Matthews et al., 2010). For instance, the use of technological tactics (e.g., muting work-related apps) may reduce the number of after-hour interruptions that occur, which in turn reduces perceived work-to-family conflict. Although longitudinal evidence is lacking, cross-sectional findings have shown that segmentation of work and family roles is associated with less work–family conflict (e.g., Danner-Vlaardingbroek et al., 2013; Kossek et al., 2012; Kubicek & Tement, 2016; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010). In line with theory and available empirical evidence, we hypothesize a negative relationship between BMT segmenting work from family and future work-to-family conflict.

Hypothesis 2: BMT (physical, temporal, communication, and technological tactics) negatively relate to future work-to-family conflict (time-based and strain-based).

Given the theoretical importance and lack of empirical research, we explore differences across the dimensions of BMT (*physical, temporal, communication, and technological*). First, we test whether the usage of BMT varies across the dimensions, as investigating differences in usage could help understand stable and dynamic predictors of BMT. The dimensions of BMT may be used to different degrees (i.e., mean-level difference). For example, some BMT may be used less often than others, because they are chosen in response to occasional work–family situations. In cross-sectional studies (Carlson et al., 2016; Haun et al., 2022), temporal and physical tactics tended to have higher means than behavioral/technological and communication tactics. The dimensions of BMT may also differ in terms of their fluctuation (i.e., variability difference). For instance, some BMT may be used in a more routine way than others, because they are adopted mainly due to stable personal preferences. Although no previous research reported within-person fluctuation of BMT use, the four dimensions of BMT exhibited different between-person variances (Carlson et al., 2016; Haun et al., 2022), such that behavioral/technological and communication tactics had greater variances than temporal and physical tactics. In sum, we pose a research question (RQ) regarding differences across the dimensions of BMT in terms of their usage.

RQ 1: Are there any differences across the dimensions of BMT, in terms of (a) the mean level and (b) the variability in usage?

Second, we examine whether the hypothesized relationships between BMT and work-to-family conflict differ across the dimensions of BMT (*physical, temporal, communication, and technological*) and work-to-family conflict (time-based and strain-based). Exploring differences across the time and strain dimensions of work-to-family conflict in relation to BMT is important, as theories and empirical evidence highlight the benefits of refining our understanding of work-to-family conflict at the dimension level (Allen et al., 2012; Hetrick et al., 2024). For instance, temporal BMT may be more effective for time-based conflict, as it helps effectively allocate the finite resource of time, whereas strain-based conflict may be more closely related to technological BMT as a means to reduce negative spillover. The dimensions of BMT showed differential relationships with various variables (e.g., psychological detachment, job/family satisfaction) in previous cross-sectional studies (Carlson et al., 2016; Haun et al., 2022), though no clear pattern emerged. In sum, we pose a RQ about whether and how the relationships between BMT and work-to-family conflict differ across their dimensions.

RQ 2: In terms of the relationships between BMT and work-to-family conflict, are there any differences across the dimensions of BMT and work-to-family conflict?

In examining the dynamic reciprocal relationship between BMT and work-to-family conflict, it is reasonable to assume that BMT and work-to-family conflict may influence each other continuously, and that the effects of this process can be measured and observed at any interval (e.g., 1 week, 1 month). As such, it is important to explore the nature of the temporal characteristics of the relationship—for

example, how quickly changes in the use of BMT impact work-to-family conflict and vice versa, how long the effects last, and when the effects peak. Answers to these questions may offer a more nuanced understanding of BMT as a means to reduce work-to-family conflict. As there is no theory or available evidence to guide us to propose a hypothesis, we pose a RQ.

RQ 3: What is the nature of the temporal characteristics of the reciprocal relationship between BMT and work-to-family conflict?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited with the help of master's degree students from a Swiss university who widely advertised the study via the Internet, word of mouth, and to their family members, neighbors, and coworkers (i.e., student-recruited sampling method; see Demerouti & Rispens, 2014). Participants had to work at least 50% of a full-time equivalent (about 20 hr per week) and were asked to participate in an online longitudinal study about the work–life interface. The study included a baseline questionnaire that assessed demographic variables and a weekly survey (to be completed each Friday at 5:00 p.m.) over 10 weeks. As an incentive, participants received individual feedback about their work and well-being at the end of the study and took part in a drawing to win a gift card worth 100 Swiss francs.

We sent our study invitation email to 346 individuals. Although 274 individuals completed the baseline survey (response rate of 79%), 27 were excluded because they either worked less than 20 hr a week ($n = 2$) or they did not complete any weekly surveys ($n = 25$). To ensure data integrity, we checked for duplicate responses by examining unique participant identifiers and confirmed that there were no duplicate responders.

The final sample had 247 participants. The sample was 62% female and 38% male, averaged 35.74 years of age ($SD = 11.37$, range = 20–62), with 59% being in a relationship and 42% having children. One percent of participants did not complete mandatory years of schooling, 6% completed mandatory years of schooling, 37% completed secondary education, 31% had a bachelor's degree, and 25% had a master's or doctoral degree. Participants worked in different professional fields (e.g., sales managers, teachers, nurses, Information Technology engineers, social workers, dental hygienists, winegrowers, lawyers, horologists, and accountants). On average, participants worked 39.95 hr per week ($SD = 6.54$) and completed 6.59 ($SD = 2.97$) weekly surveys.¹

Measures

Surveys were in French, which were prepared following back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1980). When taking the survey, participants were instructed to reflect on the past week. The response format ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

¹ The average response rate across the ten measurement occasions was 58%, ranging from 49% in Week 9 to 73% in Week 1. The response rate was unrelated to participants' use of boundary management tactics ($r = -.06$, $p = .34$) and work–family conflict (for strain-based conflict, $r = -.09$, $p = .15$; for time-based conflict, $r = -.02$, $p = .76$).

BMT Segmenting Work From Family

We developed a new scale to assess BMT segmenting work from family (see Appendix). Our scale captures physical, temporal, communication, and technological (also known as a behavioral tactic) BMT (two items each) as identified in Kreiner et al. (2009). Results from validation studies (Study 1: a cross-sectional study with $N = 324$; Study 2: a cross-sectional study with $N_1 = 268$ and $N_2 = 234$; Study 3: a two-wave study with $N = 429$) support the factor structure, measurement invariance, and validity of our measure (see Supplemental Material Part A).

Work-to-Family Conflict

Time- and strain-based conflicts (three items each) were assessed with Carlson et al.'s (2000) measure. Sample items were "My work kept me from my family activities more than I would like" (time-based) and "When I got home from work, I was often too physically tired to participate in family activities/responsibilities" (strain-based).

Analytic Approach

Data and the analysis code can be found at the OSF (https://osf.io/xu7ec/?view_only=b39099def02047a6a7380a8d3cede33b). Our data have two levels, with weekly measures (Level 1) nested within individuals (Level 2). First, we tested the factor structure and internal reliability of the weekly measures with a series of multilevel confirmatory factor analyses using Mplus 8.8 (L. K. Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). To deal with missing values, we used the full information maximum likelihood estimation to fit models directly to the raw data (Newman, 2014). Model fit was assessed by the comparative fit index, the Tucker–Lewis index and the root-mean-square error of approximation, based on recommendations by Hu and Bentler (1999) and MacCallum and Austin (2000). Furthermore, we examined the variance components of the BMT scales. Level 1 variance indicates fluctuations in individuals' use of BMT over time, whereas Level 2 variance reflects stable interindividual differences.

To test Hypotheses 1 and 2 and RQ 1–3, we used random-intercept (called fixed effect in the economic literature; cf. Hamaker & Muthén, 2020) cross-lagged panel models (RI-CLPM) with CTSEM, using the R package ctsem (Driver et al., 2017; Driver & Voelkle, 2017). The RI-CLPM extends the traditional cross-lagged panel model by considering the presence of enduring interindividual differences in the construct of interest. To do so, RI-CLPM separates the total variance into variances between persons (interindividual differences) and variances within persons (intra-individual fluctuation over time; for a detailed discussion, see Hamaker et al., 2015). We separated latent true score variance from measurement error variance (a factor RI-CLPM; Usami et al., 2019). In an RI-CLPM, cross-lagged paths inform us about whether within-person deviations from one's average level of a variable have a prospective effect on changes in within-person deviations from one's average in the other variable, whereas autoregressive paths inform us about how much of the fluctuation in a variable can be explained by its previous measurement point and can be understood as carryover effects.

In traditional RI-CLPM, the estimates of the cross-lagged effects are solely based on the interval that was implemented in the study design (e.g., a 1-week lag). As such, the results inform us about

effects with this specific interval only, and they are mute about effects with a shorter or longer interval. In RI-CLPM CTSEM, the parameter estimates infer continuously operating processes that happen in between the measurements even though measurements are taken at discrete points in time (Voelkle et al., 2012). CTSEM utilizes empirical data (i.e., all autoregressive and all cross-lagged effects) to estimate a single set of continuous-time effects, which reflect instant changes ("heuristically interpreted as the 'logarithmized' magnitude of change across a given lag," Dormann et al., 2020, p. 7) and are referred to as *drift parameters* (i.e., continuous-time drift coefficients). As continuous-time drift coefficients are not intuitive to interpret (for a detailed discussion, see Kuiper & Ryan, 2018), it is customary to convert them to estimates of discrete-time (i.e., time-specific) effects that can be used to evaluate the effects for a range of specific time intervals (e.g., 1 week, 4 weeks; e.g., see De Moor et al., 2021; Guthrie et al., 2020; Sons & Niessen, 2022). That is, CTSEM informs us about effects across an arbitrary range of specific intervals (e.g., from 1 to 10 weeks), providing insights into the timing and duration of the theorized effects. The discrete-time effects are presented as regression coefficients (i.e., discrete-time regression coefficients) and reflect the predicted strength of the effects as if they were measured at these intervals (Driver et al., 2017); we present discrete-time effects for a 1-week (the weekly time frame provides a template to organize work and family; Almeida & McDonald, 1998; Zerubavel, 1989), a 4-week (the monthly time frame is intuitive and commonly used in longitudinal research; e.g., Smith et al., 2022), and a 10-week (the time span of the present study) interval.

When continuous-time models are applied, hypotheses are usually tested by significance testing of the continuous-time drift coefficients rather than discrete-time regression coefficients, because the significance of discrete-time regression coefficients may vary across time (e.g., discrete-time regression coefficients may be nonsignificant with a very short- or long-time interval, even if continuous-time drift coefficients are significant). We examined the continuous-time drift coefficients for cross-lagged effects of work-to-family conflict on BMT to test Hypothesis 1. For Hypothesis 2, we examined continuous-time drift coefficients for the cross-lagged effects of BMT on work-to-family conflict. We inspected differences across the dimensions of BMT and work-to-family conflict for RQ 1 and RQ 2. For RQ 1a (the mean-level differences), we conducted a repeated-measure analysis of variance with post hoc tests. For RQ 3, we examined discrete time regression coefficients and plots that visualize the effects to ascertain how long the effects last and when the effects peak.

Results

Descriptives, Factorial Structure, and Measurement Invariance of the Measures

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the measures used. Results of multilevel confirmatory factor analysis on the work–family BMT measure suggested that the fit of the four-factor model (physical, temporal, communication, and technological tactics) was good and better than the fit of alternative models (see Table 2), providing evidence that the four types of tactics are distinct, at both the between- and the within-person levels. We also examined whether the four tactics can be grouped together, reflecting a general factor (using the four subscales as indicators). This model showed a good fit,

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of the Weekly Measures

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i> _{b-p}	<i>SD</i> _{w-p}	<i>W%</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Overall BMT	3.11	0.76	0.51	31	.89/.64	.70*	.74*	.66*	.67*	-.20*	-.12*
2. Physical BMT	3.26	0.95	0.70	35	.89*	—	.43*	.21*	.35*	-.13*	-.09
3. Temporal BMT	3.32	0.77	0.74	48	.90*	.77*	—	.30*	.32*	-.22*	-.13*
4. Communication BMT	2.75	0.81	0.83	51	.78*	.54*	.64*	—	.23*	-.12*	-.07*
5. Technological BMT	3.11	0.98	0.71	34	.89*	.74*	.72*	.58*	—	.08*	-.05
6. Time-based WFC	2.49	0.85	0.69	40	-.25*	-.27*	-.38*	-.11	-.12	.96/.76	.58*
7. Strain-based WFC	2.66	0.96	0.67	33	-.19*	-.21*	-.32*	-.06	-.08	.87*	.98/.78

Note. Correlations above the diagonal reflect within-person associations; correlations below the diagonal reflect between-person associations. On the diagonal, the between-person and within-person ω s are presented before and after the slash, respectively, serving as indicators of reliability. By taking into account the strength of factor loadings for each item, ω coefficients provide a more accurate estimate of reliability compared to Cronbach's α , which assumes equal item loadings (Hayes & Coutts, 2020; McNeish, 2018). BMT = boundary management tactics; WFC = work-to-family conflict; *SD*_{b-p} = between-person standard deviation; *SD*_{w-p} = within-person standard deviation; *W%* = proportion of the within-person variance compared to the total variance (1-ICC); ICC = intraclass correlation coefficient.

* $p < .05$.

$\chi^2(4) = 16.95, p < .01$; comparative fit index = .983, Tucker–Lewis index = .948, root-mean-square error of approximation = .047, SRMR_{within} = .022, SRMR_{between} = .018, indicating that it is possible to form a composite score (i.e., overall tactics scale). For work-to-family conflict, the fit of the two-factor model (time- and strain-based) was good and better than the fit of the alternative one-factor model (see Table 2).

In the next step, we tested for measurement invariance of the scales. The conventional method of assessing measurement invariance using confirmatory factor analyses (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000) becomes infeasible with many measurement occasions and participants (B. Muthén & Asparouhov, 2018); we therefore used a cross-classified factor analysis approach (McNeish et al., 2021). With this approach, it is possible to place between-person and between-time random effects on item parameters (e.g., factor loadings) to estimate the variability across people and measurement occasions. In case the variance is reasonably small, one can conclude that the item parameters are approximately invariant (e.g., measurement invariance across time). As shown in the Supplemental Material (Part B), the between-time variance of the factor loadings was very close to 0 for the BMT subscales and items as well as for the work-to-family conflict items.

This finding suggests that the factor loadings are stable across time, indicating metric measurement invariance for the weekly measures.

Preliminary Analyses

Prior to hypotheses testing, we examined whether BMT exhibited within-person variability. Variance decomposition showed that there was considerable variability in the use of BMT across 10 weeks (within-person variability: 31%, see Table 1), which is comparable to the levels of within-person variability observed with the two dimensions of work-to-family conflict (40% for time-based and 33% for strain-based conflict). Thus, findings indicate that while stable interindividual differences in the use of BMT exist, individuals also changed their use of these tactics over the weekly course of the 10-week study period.

Reciprocal Relationship Between BMT and Work-to-Family Conflict

Taken together, Hypotheses 1 and 2 proposed a reciprocal relationship between BMT and work-to-family conflict. Table 3 shows

Table 2
Multilevel Confirmatory Factor Analysis to Test the Factorial Structure of the Measures

Model	χ^2	<i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR _w	SRMR _b
Boundary management tactics							
Four factors	58.563	28	.982	.963	.028	.017	.031
Three factors: Physical and temporal combined	87.627	34	.968	.947	.033	.023	.044
Three factors: Physical and communication combined	430.525	34	.761	.606	.090	.063	.086
Three factors: Physical and technological combined	94.963	34	.963	.939	.035	.026	.041
Three factors: Temporal and communication combined	658.678	34	.623	.379	.113	.063	.072
Three factors: Temporal and technological combined	95.220	34	.963	.939	.035	.026	.037
Three factors: Communication and technological combined	310.481	34	.833	.725	.075	.075	.076
One factor	409.720	40	.777	.688	.080	.067	.087
Work-to-family conflict							
Two factors	39.917	16	.990	.982	.032	.020	.012
One factor	282.678	18	.892	.820	.101	.057	.044

Note. All χ^2 are significant. Regarding the model comparisons, for boundary management tactics, all three-factor models and the one-factor model differ from the four-factor model (all $p < .001$); for work-to-family conflict, the one-factor model differs from the two-factor model ($p < .001$). CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root-mean-square residual; w = within; b = between.

Table 3
Continuous-Time Drift Coefficients and Discrete-Time Regression Coefficients of the Autoregressive Effects

Boundary management tactic	Work-to-family conflict	Continuous-time drift coefficient			Discrete-time regression coefficient				
		1 week		4 weeks		10 weeks			
		BMT	WFC	BMT	WFC	BMT	WFC		
Overall	Time	-0.964 [-1.752, -0.429]	-982 [-1.843, -0.412]	.41 [0.17, 0.65]	.40 [0.16, 0.66]	.05 [0.003, 0.19]	.05 [-0.003, 0.20]	<.01 [-0.004, 0.02]	<.01 [-0.0002, 0.02]
	Strain	-0.741 [-1.231, -0.388]	-673 [-1.203, -0.311]	.50 [0.31, 0.69]	.53 [0.30, 0.76]	.10 [0.01, 0.27]	.13 [-0.001, 0.42]	.01 [-0.002, 0.08]	.02 [-0.002, 0.16]
Physical	Time	-0.838 [-1.598, -0.352]	-916 [-1.559, -0.463]	.47 [0.22, 0.71]	.43 [0.22, 0.65]	.08 [0.01, 0.27]	.06 [0.001, 0.22]	.01 [-0.0001, 0.05]	.01 [-0.001, 0.04]
	Strain	-0.679 [-1.251, -0.303]	-686 [-1.245, -0.305]	.52 [0.30, 0.73]	.52 [0.28, 0.75]	.10 [0.004, 0.32]	.11 [-0.03, 0.40]	.02 [-0.01, 0.10]	.02 [-0.01, 0.15]
Temporal	Time	-1.082 [-1.959, -0.477]	-883 [-1.715, -0.361]	.37 [0.13, 0.65]	.44 [0.19, 0.69]	.04 [-0.01, 0.24]	.07 [0.003, 0.25]	.01 [-0.001, 0.05]	.01 [-0.001, 0.04]
	Strain	-0.823 [-1.519, -0.367]	-825 [-1.519, -0.367]	.48 [0.28, 0.68]	.49 [0.25, 0.73]	.12 [0.02, 0.33]	.13 [0.01, 0.39]	.02 [0.0001, 0.13]	.02 [0.0001, 0.16]
Communication	Time	-0.979 [-1.901, -0.387]	-990 [-1.868, -0.429]	.40 [0.15, 0.68]	.40 [0.15, 0.64]	.05 [-0.01, 0.24]	.04 [-0.004, 0.19]	<.01 [-0.0004, 0.03]	<.01 [-0.0008, 0.02]
	Strain	-0.883 [-1.577, -0.416]	-741 [-1.511, -0.278]	.43 [0.21, 0.66]	.450 [0.22, 0.76]	.05 [-0.01, 0.19]	.10 [-0.001, 0.35]	<.01 [-0.002, 0.03]	.01 [-0.002, 0.08]
Technological	Time	-0.673 [-1.696, -0.174]	-813 [-1.5690, -0.333]	.55 [0.19, 0.85]	.47 [0.21, 0.73]	.15 [0.001, 0.58]	.08 [-0.003, 0.35]	.05 [-0.001, 0.34]	.02 [-0.01, 0.17]
	Strain	-0.674 [-1.401, -0.246]	-714 [-1.485, -0.253]	.53 [0.25, 0.79]	.52 [0.22, 0.79]	.12 [-0.01, 0.45]	.12 [-0.01, 0.48]	.03 [-0.01, 0.22]	.03 [-0.01, 0.24]

Note. Trait *r* reflects the correlation of the random intercept factors/traits. For the continuous-time drift coefficients and the discrete-time regression coefficients, the 95% credibility interval is presented in parentheses. Significant estimates are reported in bold. BMT = boundary management tactics; WFC = work-to-family conflict.

the continuous-time drift coefficients and the discrete-time regression coefficients for different intervals for the autoregressive effects. Results suggest that autoregressive effects over a 1-week period were substantial (and all significant). In contrast, there was almost no carry-over effect of BMT after 10 weeks. This indicates that changes that occur in BMT in a given week compared to the previous week's BMT are typically kept for a week or for a few weeks only.

Table 4 shows the continuous-time drift coefficients and the discrete-time regression coefficients for different intervals for the cross-lagged effects. Concerning the relationship between earlier work-to-family conflict and later use of BMT (Hypothesis 1), continuous-time drift coefficients for the cross-lagged effects were significant for strain-based work-to-family conflict ($b = .382$), but not for time-based work-to-family conflict ($b = .081$). Thus, temporary changes in strain-based work-to-family conflict were positively related to temporary changes in the use of BMT. In sum, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. Regarding the relationship between earlier BMT and later work-to-family conflict (Hypothesis 2), continuous-time drift coefficients for the cross-lagged effects were not significant for time-based ($b = .233$) as well as for strain-based conflict ($b = .119$). Thus, we found no support for Hypothesis 2.

We conducted additional analyses with a subset of participants who had data from at least four measurement occasions ($n = 182$) to examine the robustness of our findings. Findings were consistent with results from the full sample, resulting in the same conclusion about the hypotheses testing (for details, see Supplemental Tables 10 and 11).

Differences Across Dimensions of BMT

RQ 1 concerned differences in usage across the dimensions of BMT. Regarding RQ 1a, the mean level differences, a repeated-measure analysis of variance showed that frequency of use differed across tactics, $F(2.74, 673.19) = 38.39, p < .001$. Post hoc analyses indicated that physical, technological, and temporal tactics were used more often (M ranging between 3.11 and 3.32) than were communication tactics ($M = 2.75$). Regarding RQ 1b, the descriptive statistics suggested² physical, technological, and temporal tactics were used in a relatively more routinized way (SD_{w-p} ranging between 0.70 and 0.74), compared with communication tactics ($SD_{w-p} = 0.83$).

Next, RQ 2 explored whether the hypothesized relationships between BMT and work-to-family conflict differed across the dimensions. Regarding the effect of earlier work-to-family conflict on later BMT use, findings show strain-based conflict related to greater use of later physical ($b = .513$) and temporal ($b = .528$) tactics, but not to later communication ($b = .123$) or technological ($b = .306$) tactic use. For the effect of earlier BMT on later work-to-family conflict, none of the tactics related to a later decrease in work-to-family conflict (see Table 4). Unexpectedly, use of temporal tactics predicted a later increase of time-based conflicts ($b = .320$) in the following weeks.

RQ 3 concerned the temporal characteristics of the hypothesized effects. As Figure 1 shows, the effect of strain-based work-to-family conflict on later use of overall BMT was strongest across a 1-week interval and then gradually decreased. A similar pattern was observed for the relationship between earlier strain-based work-to-family

² To our knowledge, no formal test exists for within-person standard deviation comparisons.

Table 4
Continuous-Time Drift Coefficients and Discrete-Time Regression Coefficients of the Cross-Lagged Effects

Boundary management tactic	Work-to-family conflict	Continuous-time drift coefficient						Discrete-time regression coefficient						Trait <i>r</i>
		1 week			4 weeks			10 weeks			10 weeks			
		WFC → BMT	BMT → WFC	WFC → WFC	WFC → BMT	BMT → BMT	WFC → WFC	WFC → BMT	BMT → BMT	WFC → WFC	WFC → BMT	BMT → BMT	BMT → WFC	
Overall	Time	.081 [-.206, .368]	.233 [-.258, .729]	.03 [-.07, 0.15]	.09 [-.10, 0.30]	.01 [-.03, 0.08]	.03 [-.03, 0.16]	<.01 [-.0001, 0.03]	<.01 [-.0001, 0.03]	<.01 [-.0001, 0.03]	<.01 [-.0001, 0.03]	<.01 [-.0001, 0.03]	<.01 [-.0001, 0.03]	-.24
Physical	Strain	.382 [.090, .681]	.119 [-.257, .503]	.19 [0.05, .33]	.06 [-.13, .25]	.12 [0.02, .30]	.05 [-.07, .25]	.02 [0.000, 0.12]	.01 [-.009, 0.04]	.01 [-.009, 0.04]	.01 [-.009, 0.04]	.01 [-.009, 0.04]	.01 [-.009, 0.04]	-.18
	Time	.274 [-.097, .631]	.191 [-.200, .579]	.11 [-.04, 0.27]	.08 [-.09, .25]	.05 [-.02, 0.19]	.04 [-.04, 0.16]	.01 [-.009, 0.04]	.01 [-.009, 0.04]	.01 [-.009, 0.04]	.01 [-.009, 0.04]	.01 [-.009, 0.04]	.01 [-.009, 0.04]	-.25
Temporal	Strain	.513 [.125, .903]	.004 [-.355, .345]	.26 [0.07, .45]	<.01 [-.18, .18]	.16 [0.03, .43]	.01 [-.01, 0.17]	.03 [-.002, 0.17]	.01 [-.01, 0.17]	.03 [-.002, 0.17]	.01 [-.01, 0.17]	.01 [-.01, 0.17]	.01 [-.01, 0.17]	-.19
	Time	.103 [-.403, .605]	.320 [.023, .614]	.04 [-.15, 0.04]	.13 [0.01, .26]	.02 [-.05, 0.16]	.05 [0.001, 0.17]	.01 [-.01, 0.17]	<.01 [-.0003, 0.03]	<.01 [-.0003, 0.03]	<.01 [-.0003, 0.03]	<.01 [-.0003, 0.03]	<.01 [-.0003, 0.03]	-.40
Communication	Strain	.528 [.111, .961]	.266 [-.022, .558]	.24 [0.05, .42]	.12 [-.01, .25]	.14 [-.01, 0.23]	.07 [-.01, 0.23]	.03 [0.0003, 0.18]	.01 [-.01, 0.004]	.03 [0.0003, 0.18]	.02 [-.0002, 0.10]	.01 [-.0002, 0.10]	.01 [-.0002, 0.10]	-.37
	Time	-.058 [-.505, .386]	-.046 [-.566, .480]	-.02 [-.20, 0.16]	-.02 [-.25, 0.17]	-.01 [-.10, 0.07]	-.01 [-.15, 0.06]	-.01 [-.15, 0.06]	-.01 [-.01, 0.004]	-.01 [-.01, 0.004]	-.01 [-.01, 0.004]	-.01 [-.01, 0.004]	-.01 [-.01, 0.004]	-.07
Technological	Strain	.123 [-.343, .595]	-.032 [-.359, .301]	.06 [-.15, 0.30]	-.01 [-.16, 0.15]	.03 [-.08, 0.23]	<.01 [-.08, 0.12]	<.01 [-.08, 0.12]	.01 [-.01, 0.04]	.01 [-.01, 0.04]	.01 [-.01, 0.04]	.01 [-.01, 0.04]	.01 [-.01, 0.04]	-.07
	Time	.023 [-.316, .366]	-.026 [-.494, .448]	.02 [-.13, 0.22]	<.01 [-.22, 0.27]	.03 [-.08, 0.32]	.02 [-.16, 0.38]	.02 [-.16, 0.38]	.03 [-.02, 0.21]	.03 [-.02, 0.21]	.03 [-.02, 0.21]	.03 [-.02, 0.21]	.03 [-.02, 0.21]	-.13
	Strain	.306 [-.015, .632]	-.029 [-.459, .401]	.16 [-.01, 0.34]	-.01 [-.23, 0.23]	.11 [-.0004, 0.40]	.01 [-.18, 0.29]	.01 [-.18, 0.29]	.04 [-.0001, 0.23]	.04 [-.0001, 0.23]	.02 [-.002, 0.17]	.02 [-.002, 0.17]	.02 [-.002, 0.17]	-.07

Note. Trait *r* reflects the correlation of the random intercept factors/traits. For the continuous-time drift coefficients and the discrete-time regression coefficients, the 95% credibility interval is presented in parentheses. Significant estimates are reported in bold. BMT = boundary management tactics; WFC = work-to-family conflict.

conflict and later use of physical and temporal BMT (see Figure 2) and the relationship between earlier temporal tactics and later time-based conflict (see Figure 3).

Discussion

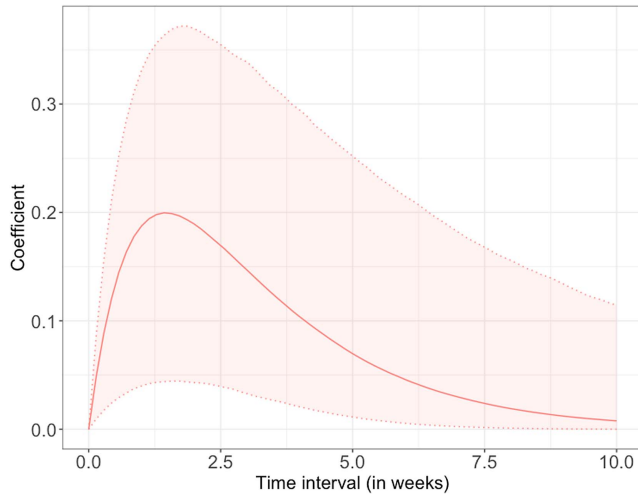
In this study, we drew on control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982) to better understand work–family boundary management as a goal-oriented process (Sturges, 2012). This process is inherently dynamic as individuals adopt behaviors based on an ongoing appraisal of their current status against their goal. Results show individuals’ use of work–family BMT is characterized by fluctuating within-person changes as well as stable interindividual differences (i.e., within-person variability: 31%). Juxtaposing this finding with the within-person variance of work–family conflict—a key work–family construct known to have both intra- and interindividual variations (Maertz & Boyar, 2011; Smith et al., 2022)—as reported in the review of broader applied psychology literature (range: .29–.89, Podsakoff et al., 2019), our findings highlight that much remains to be learned about variability in the use of work–family BMT beyond knowledge accrued from the prevailing between-person approach. Our investigation of within-person reciprocal relationships between work–family BMT and work-to-family conflict represents a significant step toward a better understanding of dynamic work–family boundary management.

Informed by the notion of a discrepancy-reducing regulation loop (Carver & Scheier, 1982), we hypothesized individuals would respond to work-to-family conflict by increasing BMT use. We found increased strain-based work-to-family conflict prompted greater future use of BMT, specifically physical and temporal tactics. There are several tentative explanations for the use of these specific tactics over others in response to work-to-family conflict. First, physical and temporal tactics might have been preferred, because they are more “private.” In contrast, directly communicating work–family needs or making oneself unavailable during after hours by avoiding work-related information and communication technology use is likely to involve negotiation with others who coconstruct the work boundary (e.g., one’s supervisor or colleagues). As such, communication and technological tactics might have been disfavored to the extent that work-to-family integration is desired by others at work. Second, these tactics might have been chosen in response to strain-based work-to-family conflict, because physically distancing oneself from work was thought to have greater potential to facilitate recovery from work strain. Previous studies similarly noted that the tactic of creating physical space between home and work was often used along with the temporal tactic of finding respite (Kreiner et al., 2009). In this sense, the use of physical and temporal tactics may bring about recovery and health benefits (e.g., psychological detachment, fatigue; Sonnentag et al., 2022). Future research that considers a variety of well-being indicators as outcomes of BMT is warranted to examine such a possibility.

Of note, time-based work-to-family conflict did not relate to future use of BMT. We offer two speculative explanations. First, strain-based work-to-family conflict might have been a stronger trigger for the tactics due to the greater harm it causes. Evidence suggests that strain-based conflict tends to have stronger negative associations with attitudinal outcomes (job and life satisfaction) than does time-based conflict (Hetrick et al., 2024). Thus, perceived

Figure 1

Discrete Time Cross-Lagged Effects and Their 95% Credibility Intervals of Strain-Based Work-To-Family Conflict on Overall Boundary Management Tactics Across a Time Range From 0 to 10 Weeks



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

discrepancy between goal and current status may have been more salient in the case of strain-based conflict, which subsequently related to the adoption of BMT. Second, the adoption of boundary tactics in response to time-based conflict may occur within a shorter time frame (e.g., on the same day or in the same week). In this case, a potential linkage between time-based conflict and resultant tactics might not have been captured in our weekly diary study. Future longitudinal research may adopt a shorter time interval to test this possibility.

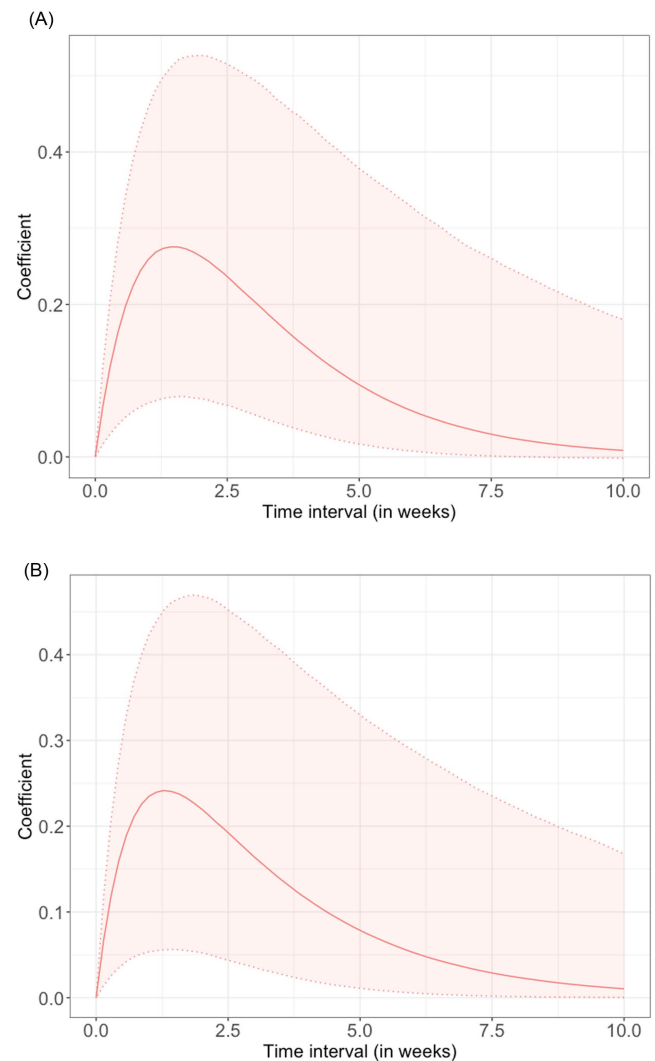
Contrary to expectations and work-family boundary management theory, BMT use did not reduce future work-to-family conflict, suggesting BMT might not deliver expected benefits. In light of this null effect, control theory offers an important consideration. According to the discrepancy-reducing feedback loop, the relation between output function (i.e., BMT) and input function (i.e., the perception of work-to-family conflict) is mediated via the effect of the output function on the environment. Further, “external disturbance” exerts effects on the environment in addition to the output function (individuals’ actions). Taken together, the relationship between earlier BMT and later work-to-family conflict may be better understood when mediators or moderators are considered. For example, although individuals’ use of technological BMT can reduce after-hour work interruptions (i.e., changes in the environment), the overall perceived work-to-family conflict may appear unchanged, because individuals’ perceptions may change more slowly or the lack of change may be due to other factors (e.g., overtime work due to high workloads, Smith et al., 2022). Future research on the dynamic management of work-family boundaries may expand our study by considering additional tenets of control theory.

The counterintuitive finding that temporal tactics in a given week led to more future time-based work-to-family conflict merits discussion. On one hand, this positive relationship may have to do with

the perception of time, which is a subjective experience that has implications for work-family conflict (Allen et al., 2019). Adopting temporal tactics to segment work from family amid ongoing work-family conflict may heighten individuals’ sense of time scarcity, which is known to cause myopic behaviors that focus on short-term gains (Zhao & Tomm, 2018). Prioritizing immediate work tasks at the expense of the family might have resulted in more subsequent work-to-family conflict. On the other hand, individuals’ initiatives to set aside time for nonwork in a given week may result in more unfinished tasks that have to be managed in the next week, thereby increasing time-based work-to-family conflict. Given that temporal tactics were used in response to strain-based work-to-family

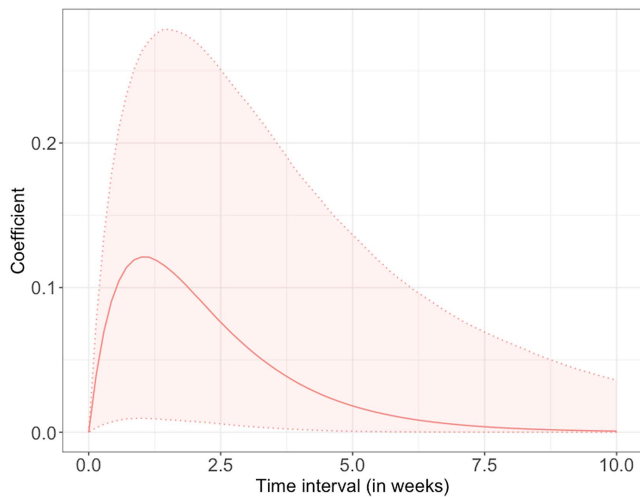
Figure 2

Discrete Time Cross-Lagged Effects and Their 95% Credibility Intervals of Strain-Based Work-to-Family Conflict on Physical and Temporal Boundary Management Tactics Across a Time Range From 0 to 10 Weeks



Note. The figure shows effects of strain-based work-to-family conflict on (A) physical and (B) temporal boundary management tactics. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Figure 3
Discrete Time Cross-Lagged Effects and Their 95% Credibility Intervals of Temporal Boundary Management Tactics on Time-Based Work-to-Family Conflict Across a Time Range From 0 to 10 Weeks



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

conflict, this result suggests that temporal BMT, without reducing the sheer amount of workload, may not be a sustainable solution.

Last, our continuous time approach yielded interesting new insights as to the temporal aspects of work–family BMT. The pattern of increased use of physical and temporal tactics in response to higher strain-based work-to-family conflict than usual was most pronounced with a 1-week interval and tapered off over 6 weeks. Additionally, the increase in time-based conflict due to use of temporal tactics peaked in the next week. Results suggest individuals attempt to address perceived discrepancy concerning strain-based work-to-family conflict within a relatively close time frame (i.e., in the following week), and that the effect of BMT is not sustained over a long period.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our research offers several important theoretical implications. First, by providing evidence for within-person variabilities of work–family BMT, our study supports the theoretical premise of boundary theory that suggests tactics are behaviors that vary in use over time (Kreiner et al., 2009). Further, by disentangling within-person changes from between-person differences in the use of work–family BMT, we add to the emerging stream of research that delves into stable and variable aspects of work–family experiences (e.g., Ford et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2022). That is, results highlight differences between previous research based on average BMT and variable uses of BMT in terms of their association with work-to-family conflict. These findings are important, because they open the door for developing a more precise theory that delineates how and why the relationship between BMT and work–family conflict differs across levels of analysis (McCormick et al., 2020). Building on this foundational result, future research should continue investigating differential factors associated with stability and change in BMT use

(cf. Smith et al., 2022). For instance, average use may be explained by stable boundary preferences (e.g., Carlson et al., 2016; Park & Jex, 2011) or contextual characteristics such as organizational norms and the home environment (e.g., Allen et al., 2021; Kossek & Lautsch, 2012), whereas fluctuating use is triggered by changes in work–family situations as we found in this study.

Our research also expands boundary theory by explicating the process of boundary management. Although boundary theory put forth the notion of dynamic boundary management aimed at reducing interrole conflict via adopting specific tactics (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009), the processes through which such actions are employed have not been understood well. Prior qualitative research hinted at the use of tactics following a problem with work–home boundaries (e.g., confronting violators; Kreiner et al., 2009), but whether and why work–family conflict leads individuals to adopt more tactics has rarely been considered in the development of boundary theory. Drawing on the notion of discrepancy-reducing feedback loop in control theory, we showed that increased strain-based work-to-family conflict, signifying discrepancy from the reference state, prompted more segmenting boundary tactics. All in all, by documenting a process in which BMT change over time in relation to work-to-family conflict, we advance the dynamic understanding of work–family boundary management.

Results that the use of boundary tactics is a response to strain-based work-to-family conflict point to an opportunity to examine BMT within a broader stress and coping framework. Coping strategies refer to individuals' cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage taxing demands appraised as exceeding their personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Although research on BMT has developed independently of the coping literature, our research highlights commonalities between the two in that both are actions taken in a stressful situation that have situational and dispositional aspects (Carver & Scheier, 1994; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Drawing on the coping literature may provide new angles to examine BMT. For example, work–family BMT aimed at changing work–family boundaries to reduce interrole conflict (Ashforth et al., 2000) may be considered *problem-focused coping* (attempts to eliminate or resolve the problem; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984); in contrast, cognitive change (Carver & Scheier, 1982) to accept work–family conflict as an inevitable part of work may be considered *emotion-focused coping* (attempts to change thoughts and feelings resulting from the problem; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Given that the effectiveness of coping strategies in dealing with work-to-family conflict varies (e.g., Rantanen et al., 2011; Rotondo et al., 2003), depending on other factors such as the controllability of the situation, future research that measures “objective” work and family situations may help better understand circumstances in which BMT are effective.

Boundary theory (Kreiner et al., 2009) has been silent as to how various BMT may differ in terms of the frequency of usage or effectiveness. Our research advances boundary theory by revealing distinctive patterns across the different types of BMT in terms of usage (e.g., the use of communication tactics was relatively uncommon and fluctuated more over time, whereas physical, temporal, and technological tactics were more common and used relatively consistently) and the relation with work-to-family conflict (e.g., strain-based conflict positively related to the subsequent use of physical and temporal tactics). In doing so, our results also lend further weight to the view that future theory development in the work–family field

should pay greater attention to the dimensionality of BMT (Allen et al., 2021; Kreiner et al., 2009) and of work-family conflict (Hetrick et al., 2024). Consideration of the multidimensionality of key constructs is necessary to understand *why* certain work-family BMT are effective in reducing certain types of work-family conflict.

Concerning practical implications, viewing BMT use as a coping mechanism may help in understanding how individuals deal with strain-based work-to-family conflict. Also, the tactics individuals adopt (physical and temporal) may have recovery and well-being benefits (Sonnentag et al., 2022), which equip them to better manage future work-family conflict (Matthews et al., 2014). However, because BMT were not effective in directly reducing work-to-family conflict, we urge caution about promoting work-family BMT as a panacea. In light of previous research that has shown the critical role of organizational factors in minimizing work-family conflict (e.g., Michel et al., 2011), interventions that address the work environment (e.g., reducing workload; supervisor training) are likely more effective in reducing work-family conflict than those focusing solely on the individual (e.g., teaching BMT).

Last, the effectiveness of specific BMT may depend on organizational context. For instance, previous diary research found that using smartphones less at home for work-related matters, which is akin to technological BMT, did not facilitate psychological detachment among employees who perceived low segmentation norms (Derks et al., 2014). We reckon that the decisions to use, effectiveness, and consequences of BMT might depend on the organizational work-family climate or a more specific “work-family boundary climate.” Though our findings do not offer specific guidance as to selecting specific BMT, general advice for organizations would be to create a supportive work environment in which employees BMT deliver desired benefits.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

Strengths of this study include use of longitudinal data to examine reciprocal relations between BMT and work-to-family conflict. The substantial carryover effects across weeks in the focal variables, along with considerable within-person variabilities, suggest that the weekly design was suitable to address our research questions (Allen et al., 2019). RI-CLPM CTSEMs allowed us to separate recently perceived work-to-family conflict and recently implemented tactics from stable experiences. Moreover, we developed a multidimensional measure of work-family BMT that is in line with its theoretical conceptualization (cf. Reinke & Gerlach, 2022) and that does not limit the domain within which BMT are enacted (cf. Carlson et al., 2016).

A limitation to our work is that although boundary management is bidirectional (i.e., managing boundaries to segment work from family or to segment family from work, Reinke & Gerlach, 2022), we solely focused on BMT segmenting work from family. Also, we focused on time- and strain-based conflict, but work-family conflict occurs in other forms (e.g., behavior-based, Carlson et al., 2000; energy-based, Greenhaus et al., 2006). Given the benefits of examining dimension-level work-family conflict (Hetrick et al., 2024) and differential patterns that emerged for time- versus strain-based conflict in this study, we call for more research to consider various dimensions of work-family conflict related to BMT. Next, although the hypothesized relationship between earlier work-to-family conflict and later use of BMT was theory-driven (Ashforth et al., 2000; Carver & Scheier, 1982), we acknowledge that the

theorized perceived discrepancy associated with control theory was not assessed. Given the findings of the present study that supports the applicability of control theory, additional research that directly tests perceived discrepancies is merited. Finally, our weekly study does not capture shorter term, day-to-day dynamics between BMT and work-family conflict. We recommend future studies take an episodic approach (Maertz & Boyar, 2011) to investigate discrete instances in which specific BMT and work-to-family interruptions are paired.

Our findings suggest several other promising avenues for future research. First, building on the current research, future theory and research may test other tenets of control theory to delve into the processes by which people regulate work-family boundaries over time. For instance, besides a behavioral change (i.e., output function), control theory posits a cognitive change (i.e., adopting a different goal) as a possible reaction toward a perceived discrepancy (Carver & Scheier, 1982); drawing on this proposition, it would be interesting to examine whether individuals’ acceptance of work-family conflict as an inevitable part of work or if adaptation to work-family conflict over time (e.g., Matthews et al., 2014) results in a cognitive change to set a more feasible goal.

Future research may also explore underlying mechanisms through which work-to-family conflict triggers the adoption of BMT. Previous research has shown that work-family conflict may generate different emotional and behavioral outcomes via attribution (e.g., work-family conflict attributed to internal and controllable causes induces guilt and motivates adaptive behaviors to minimize interrole conflict, whereas work-family conflict attributed to stable causes elicits hopelessness and triggers withdrawal behaviors; Ilies et al., 2012). Attributing work-family conflict to external or uncontrollable causes (e.g., an unsupportive supervisor or a work-centric organizational culture) may be one reason why individuals do not use BMT in response to work-family conflict.

Future research may also consider examining moderators of the relation between BMT and interrole conflict, especially given some of our unexpected null findings. Boundary theory posits individuals’ actions to organize work and family are influenced by various factors, such as contexts and role senders at work and home (Ashforth et al., 2000). For instance, segmenting tactics may be effective only among individuals whose supervisor supports role segmentation or whose spouse also prefers segmentation (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2015; Hahn & Dormann, 2013). Along these lines, a fruitful avenue for future research could be examining how reciprocal relations between the use of BMT and work-family conflict unfold over time among dual-earner couples using actor-partner interdependence models.

Conclusion

Via the lens of control theory, we contribute to the development of a richer and more dynamic theory of work-family boundary management as a dynamic, goal-oriented process. We found BMT use varied over time, exhibiting within-person variability comparable to that of work-family conflict. Strain-based work-to-family conflict related to greater later use of temporal and physical tactics, with the strongest effect observed across a 1-week interval. However, BMT did not relate to a later decrease in work-to-family conflict. Dimensions of tactics differed in terms of usage and their relation with work-to-family conflict. In sum, this study offers novel insights into the dynamic use

of multidimensional BMT and lays a foundation for further research to advance a process-oriented understanding of work–family boundary management.

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Appendix

Work–Family Boundary Management Tactics

Physical tactics

- After work, I put some distance between myself and my work, for example, by commuting, going out for a walk, or intentionally closing the door to my home office.
- I created a symbolic distance between my work and private life, for example, by keeping separate calendars, separating my work and home keys, or keeping work-related objects away from home.

Temporal tactics

- I scheduled times for recreation to internally distance myself from my work, for example, by allowing myself time off or vacations or scheduling breaks in my daily routine to spend with family or friends or on my hobbies.
- I set specific hours for my work and personal life, for example, by scheduling my time so that I have adequate time for both work tasks and personal matters.

Communication tactics

- I communicated my needs regarding my work and private life to my superior, for example, by talking about

my private commitments or activities and explaining what they require.

- I communicated my needs regarding my work and private life to my team, for example, by talking about my private commitments or activities and coordinating with the team.

Technological tactics

- Using technology, I deliberately made myself unavailable in my free time, for example, by turning off my (work) phone, using notification manager apps, or muting apps or chats.
- I did not access work-related information and communication technology in my free time, for example, by not reading work-related messages or by avoiding contacting colleagues for work-related issues.

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