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Work–Family Role Blurring and Work–Family Conflict: The Moderating Influence of Job Resources and Job Demands

Paul Glavin[1] and Scott Schieman[1]

Abstract

Using border theory and the job demands resources model, we examine the work antecedents of *work–family role blurring* and its consequences for work-to-family conflict in a national sample of U.S. workers. Job predictors of role blurring include jobs with more authority, excessive work pressures, schedule control, and decision-making latitude. Role blurring is associated with higher levels of work-to-family conflict, though the strength of this association is contingent on workers' access and exposure to certain job resources and job demands. Specifically, the association is stronger among workers reporting excessive pressures, and weaker among those with decision-making latitude and some schedule control.

Keywords

role blurring, job demands resources model, work–family conflict, border theory, work–family boundary

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Recent transformations in work and family have led to a blurring of the boundaries that separate these domains (Clark, 2000). Changes in the nature and timing of paid work, including the proliferation of nonstandard and flexible work arrangements, have paralleled the rise of the dual-earner household as the dominant family form in the last few decades (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Kalleberg, 2008). These developments have dramatically altered the ways in which work and family roles interact; changes that traditional role segmentation and spillover theories inadequately explain (Clark, 2000). As the boundaries between these role domains become more fluid for many workers, work–family role blurring—the integration of behaviors and thoughts associated with work and family roles—has become an increasingly relevant work–family phenomenon (Desrochers, Hilton, & Larwood, 2005). However, although role blurring has been acknowledged among work–family researchers (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006; Voydanoff, 2005), there has yet to be a systematic examination of its antecedents and consequences. Using the insights of border theory (Clark, 2000) we address this gap by the following: (a) documenting the work conditions associated with role blurring among a national sample of American workers, and (b) investigating the relationship between role blurring and work-to-family conflict.

Research has revealed inconsistent findings regarding the beneficial versus deleterious effects of role blurring. Some research has documented the benefits of integrated work–family domains for managing competing role demands (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), whereas others find role blurring to be associated with increased role conflict (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006; Voydanoff, 2005). We attempt to reconcile these findings by considering the *work context* of role blurring (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). More specifically, we examine the potentially moderating effects of job conditions that are associated with the flexibility and permeability of the work–family boundary. Job conditions such as schedule control and excessive work pressures may encourage role blurring by increasing boundary flexibility and permeability; however, they may differ in the extent that they facilitate desirable versus undesirable forms of role blurring. Using Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) job demands–resources (JD-R) model, we investigate whether the consequences of role blurring are contingent on access to job resources and exposure to job demands. In the following section, we describe the ways that border theory and the JD-R model might help illuminate the antecedents and consequences of role blurring.

Role Blurring and Border Theory

Desrochers and Sargent (2004) describe role blurring as follows: "[t]he experience of confusion or difficulty in distinguishing one's work from one's family roles in a given setting which these roles are seen as highly integrated, such as doing paid work at home" (p. 41). Historically, role blurring can be traced prior to the industrial revolution. Before capitalist industrialism, the integration of work and family life was commonplace, as the preindustrial household often served as a site of economic production—making a distinction between "family" and "work" largely inconsequential (Zaretsky, 1976). With the expansion of wage labor and the decline of the household as a source of economic subsistence in the 19th century, activities relating to economic production and social reproduction became increasingly separated from one another. A "separate spheres" logic subsequently emerged that viewed work and family as unique domains with distinct behaviors and expectations (Coontz, 1992). The physical and temporal boundaries delineating these domains solidified in the early 20th century with the growth of the modern bureaucratic workplace (Perrow, 2002), effectively reducing role blurring to an experience of a minority group of workers.

Recent developments, however, have led some to consider role blurring as a reemerging work–family experience for some workers. Two specific trends are of particular relevance to this reemergence: the rise of a 24/7 global economy that has increased employer and employee demand for flexible work schedules and remote work options, and the proliferation of communications technologies that allow work to be performed "anytime, anywhere" (Chesley 2005; Clark 2000; Vallas, 1999). In the face of these changes, role-strain and spillover theories that tend to emphasize rigid role boundaries do not adequately reflect the complexity and fluidity of the contemporary work–family interface whereby many workers now exercise considerable agency over when and where work and family roles are enacted. In contrast, border theory (Clark, 2000) emphasizes how the contemporary worker is a "border crosser" who actively transitions between work and family domains, and for whom role blurring may be a common occurrence. Although role blurring may appear conceptually similar to role conflict, it is distinct in its focus on *overlapping* roles, as opposed to role incompatibility.

Although border theory has been critiqued for its limited empirical validation (Voydanoff, 2005), role blurring has drawn some empirical attention from researchers interested in understanding its implications for role performance and well-being (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Clark, 2000; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006). This research has identified how work

and family roles may become blurred in a variety of ways. Voydanoff (2007) suggests that although performing paid work at home is often considered the prototypical form of role blurring, the phenomenon can be assessed more directly by examining a set of behavioral indicators (e.g., multitasking on work and family activities; being contacted for work purposes at home) and psychological indicators (e.g., experiencing work thoughts while at home). Collectively, these indicators denote high role blurring, in so much that individuals who experience *all of them* are likely to make little or no distinction between work and family roles.

Here, it is worth emphasizing the distinctiveness of role blurring from its individual components. A worker may communicate frequently with their workplace while at home, or they may multitask on work and family responsibilities; however these activities on their own do not fully capture the notion of role blurring as developed by Desrochers and Sargent (2004), where behaviors/thoughts associated with work and family roles combine with the consequence that the individual has difficulty in separating these roles from one another. Thus, it is the collective experience of the fluid integration of thoughts and behaviors of work and family life that we are interested in examining.[1]

Boundary Flexibility and Permeability

We draw on the key concepts of border theory—especially "flexibility" and "permeability"—to frame our investigation of the antecedents of role blurring (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000). According to border theory, the boundaries between work and family domains exist along a continuum of complete segmentation to complete integration of roles. High segmentation implies that the physical and temporal boundaries between work and family roles serve to create separate and distinct domains; by contrast, an individual experiences high integration when "no distinction exists between what belongs to the 'home' or 'work' and where they are engaged" (Nippert-Eng, 1996, p. 567). Integrated role domains thus imply a high likelihood and degree of role blurring, whereas segmented domains reduce the possibility of role blurring.

The extent that an individual has integrated versus segmented role domains depends on the degree of *boundary flexibility* and *permeability*. Boundary flexibility is the extent to which work duties can be performed outside of the usual spatial and temporal parameters of work. Boundary permeability, however, involves "the degree to which a role allows one to be physically located in the role's domain but psychologically and/or behaviorally involved in another role" (Ashforth et al., 2000, p. 474). A worker who can transition easily from family responsibilities to deal with work-related demands has a permeable boundary.

Although role blurring necessitates a permeable work–family boundary, we set out to distinguish the two concepts, where others have conflated them (Matthews & Barnes-Farerell, 2010). We consider permeability a necessary, but not sufficient condition for role blurring to occur. An individual who brings work home, for example, has a permeable work–family boundary; but if they perform this work at a clearly demarcated time and place within the home (e.g., a home office) they are not strictly engaging in role blurring, as the individual may have no problems in distinguishing between their family role from their work role. Rather, as we have discussed, it is the *combination* of work and family behaviors and thoughts that we consider to be role blurring. Bringing work home represents a permeable work–family boundary, therefore, that increases the likelihood of role blurring; but it does not necessarily require role blurring to occur.

Together, boundary flexibility and permeability represent two dimensions of the integration–segmentation continuum, and influence the extent that one experiences role blurring (Ashforth et al., 2000; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006). Individuals who vary when and where they work should experience more blurring because a flexible work–family boundary increases the likelihood that aspects of work and family roles will converge. Similarly, greater boundary permeability should make it easier for individuals to respond to intruding role demands, and experience role blurring. Role blurring should therefore be positively associated with work and family conditions that result in a flexible and permeable work–family boundary.

Work Antecedents of Role Blurring

Based on the insights of border theory, individuals who are granted flexibility and control in their job should experience more role blurring because these conditions tend to result in a more flexible and porous work–family boundary. Previous theory and evidence underscores the ways job control reflects "the working individual's potential control over his tasks and his conduct during the working day" (Karasek, 1979, p. 289). Schedule flexibility and the ability to make decisions are core indicators of job control (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007); however, we include job authority as an additional indicator of workplace control (Schieman & Reid, 2009). Although schedule control implies temporal flexibility of the work–family boundary, job authority facilitates control over the nature of one's work, which should facilitate temporal and spatial boundary flexibility, as workers have greater discretion to integrate roles to complete work and family responsibilities. Analyses of several national surveys of workers, including the 2002 National

Study of the Changing Workforce, confirm the link between job flexibility/control and various indicators of role blurring (Schieman & Young, 2010; Voydanoff, 2005).

Work conditions may also influence role blurring by shaping the permeability of the work–family boundary. For example, excessive work pressures should increase boundary permeability and role blurring, as workers may feel pressured to devote additional nonwork time and energy to attend to these pressures (Schieman & Young, 2010). Additionally, Ashforth et al. (2000) suggest that individuals who identify strongly with the work role should be more likely to look for opportunities that allow them to invoke this role identity. Work-role identification should therefore be associated with boundary permeability that enables role blurring and the expression of one's work identity outside of the traditional work domain. Several studies find evidence of this association (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006; Winkel & Clayton, 2010).

Is Role Blurring Associated With Work-to-Family Conflict?

According to border theory, individuals are motivated to achieve a level of personally defined "balance" between their work and family lives (Clark, 2000). Balance is constrained, however, by characteristics of individuals' work and family roles, and the ways in which role domains are similar or different. One question that interests work–family researchers is whether high levels of role blurring leads to beneficial or undesirable work–family outcomes (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006; Voydanoff, 2005). Two general perspectives inform this question. We refer to the first as the "flexible-resource perspective," which suggests that role blurring represents a resource that can help individuals avoid or minimize work-to-family conflict because it offers flexibility to deal with competing role demands (Duxbury, Higgins, & Neufeld, 1998; Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004) or facilitates role transitions (Ashforth et al., 2000).

Alternatively, the "greedy-role perspective" argues that role blurring increases the likelihood that work will encroach on nonwork roles, extracting excessive amounts of attention and energy (Batt & Valcour, 2003). This perspective follows from Coser's (1974) classic notion of work as a "greedy institution" that continually attempts to exert itself on the traditional time and space of the family domain. Role blurring may therefore facilitate a process of "border creep" in the work–family interface that results in more work-to-family conflict.

Although empirical evidence that supports the flexible-resource perspective is limited, some studies of home-based workers have found that role integration reduces work-to-family conflict (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). The majority of work–family research on role blurring appears to support the greedy-role perspective; however, small sample sizes or single-item indicators of role blurring limit the scope of their conclusions. For example, Matthews and Barnes-Farerell (2010) find a positive association between work-to-family conflict and family domain permeability, but the study was limited by its reliance on a small convenience-based sample of workers. Other studies based on larger samples of workers have found positive associations between single-item role blurring measures and work-to-family conflict (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006; Voydanoff, 2005). Given this evidence, we expect that role blurring is associated with higher levels of work-to-family conflict.

Based on the insights of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), we seek to expand on prior research by considering whether job conditions also moderate the association between role blurring and work-to-family conflict. According to the JD-R model, work conditions are organized into two broad categories: demands and resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The degree and interactions of these conditions influence workers' experience of job strain and their well-being. According to Bakker and Geurts (2004):

> Job demands refer to those physical, psychosocial, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or mental effort and are, therefore, associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs . . . Job resources refer to those physical, psychosocial, or organizational aspects of the job that may be functional in meeting task requirements (i.e., job demands) and may thus reduce the associated physiological and/or psychological costs—and at the same time stimulate personal growth and development. (p. 348)

Although the JD-R model was originally focused on the effects of job conditions on well-being, researchers have subsequently applied it to interpret how job resources and demands influence exposure to positive and negative work–family outcomes (Grotto & Lyness, 2010; Schieman, Milkie, & Glavin, 2009). Taking a similar approach, we argue that work conditions not only influence the extent of role blurring by shaping boundary flexibility/permeability; they also represent an important *contextual influence* that impacts whether role blurring facilitates or hinders positive work–family outcomes (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000).

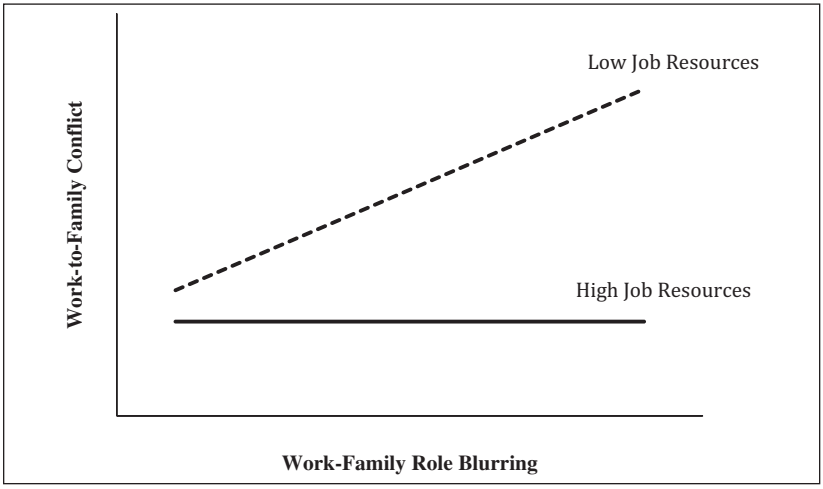

Figure 1. The job resource hypothesis
Note: Job resources include schedule control and decision-making latitude.

Schedule control and decision-making latitude are two commonly designated resources in the JD-R model. As resources that facilitate control over the work–family boundary, schedule control and decision-making latitude should be associated with less detrimental forms of role blurring. The hypothesized positive association between role blurring and work-to-family conflict should therefore be weaker or absent for workers with greater schedule control and decision-making latitude. Figure 1 demonstrates the job resource hypothesis. Conversely, the job demands hypothesis implies that excessive work pressures represent demands that should intensify the link between role blurring and work-to-family conflict, as individuals who experience the pull of a greedy job are forced to engage in role blurring that favors work over the family role. The positive association between role blurring and work-to-family conflict should be stronger for workers who report excessive work pressures.

Summary of Predictions

In summary, we predict that work-role conditions that influence boundary flexibility and permeability will be key determinants of the extent that individuals experience role blurring. These include, flexibility and control over the timing and nature of work (boundary flexibility), excessive work pressures and work-role identification (boundary permeability). Regarding the consequences of

role blurring, the greedy-role perspective predicts that role blurring should be associated with more work-to-family conflict. Finally, the JD-R model guides our job resources and job demands hypotheses: job resources (schedule control, decision-making latitude) should attenuate the positive association between role blurring and work-to-family conflict, whereas job demands (excessive work pressures) should strengthen this association.

Method

Sample

To test the hypotheses described above, we analyze data from the Work, Stress and Health Survey (WSH), which involved telephone interviews with adults in all the 50 states in 2005. To obtain the original sample, we used a list-assisted random digit dialing (RDD) selection drawn proportionally from all 50 states from GENESYS Sampling Systems. Eligible participants are 18 years of age or older and participating in the paid labor force. At Wave 1, we successfully interviewed 71% of eligible individuals yielding a sample of 1,800 adults. At Wave 2 interviews, which occurred approximately 18 to 20 months after the initial interview, we successfully reinterviewed 1,286 of the original participants. In the analyses presented here, we use data from this second interview because the focal measures of interest were only included in that interview. We excluded participants with missing values on the focal measures, yielding 1,075 cases for the present analyses.[2] Sample characteristics for Wave 2 of the WSH study are similar to the population estimates of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2005 American Community Survey (ACS).[3] Some differences exist, however: Women are overrepresented in the WSH study (59% vs. 51% in the ACS), whereas WSH respondents are on average older (46 years vs. 36 years in the ACS) and are more likely to be married (57% vs. 49% in the ACS).

Measures

Work–family role blurring. Based on Voydanoff's (2007) research, we use three items to assess the extent of role blurring at home: (a) *Contacted outside of work*: "How often do coworkers, supervisors, managers, customers, or clients *contact you* about work-related matters outside normal work hours? Include telephone, cell phone, beeper, and pager calls, as well as faxes and email that you have to respond to." Response choices are coded as follows: (1) *never*, (2) *less than once a month*, (3) *once a week*, (4) *several times a week*, and (5) *one or more times a day*. (b) *Multitasking on work and home*

tasks: "How often do you try to work on job tasks and home tasks at the same time while you are at home? Response choices are coded as follows: (1) *never*, (2) *rarely*, (3) *sometimes*, and (4) *frequently*. (c) *Thinking about work* "How often do you think about things going on at work when you are not working?" Response choices are coded as follows: (1) *never*, (2) *rarely*, (3) *sometimes*, and (4) *frequently*. These items have been used in the 2002 NSCW, and have been examined as sole-item indicators of role blurring in published research (Schieman & Glavin, 2008; Voydanoff, 2007).

We standardized, summed, and then averaged the items to create the index such that higher scores indicate higher levels of work–family role blurring. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .65 for the scale is within typical acceptable limits (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1978), though not above the ideal .7 level. We therefore conducted factor analyses to examine the measure further. These analyses (appendix) revealed that the role blurring items loaded strongly on one underlying factor. Furthermore, there was no evidence that the role-blurring items loaded on the underlying work-to-family conflict construct. Table 1 reports the distribution of responses to these individual role-blurring items.

Work-to-family conflict. Four items assess the frequency that individuals experienced work-to-family conflict in the past 3 months: "How often have you not had enough time for your family or other important people in your life because of your job?," "How often have you not had the energy to do things with your family or other important people in your life because of your job?," "How often has work kept you from doing as good a job at home as you could?," and "How often has your job kept you from concentrating on important things in your family and personal life?" Response choices are coded as *never* (1), *rarely* (2), *sometimes* (3), *often* (4), and *very often* (5). We averaged items such that higher scores indicate higher work-to-family conflict ($\alpha = .85$). These items are used widely in the work–family literature and in respectable national work surveys such as the NSCW (Bond, Thompson, Galinsky, & Prottas, 2003).

Job Conditions

Schedule control. One question asks about schedule control: "Who usually decides when you start and finish work each day at your main job? Is it someone else, or can you decide within certain limits, or are you entirely free to decide when you start and finish work?" We coded responses as *no schedule control* (0), *some control* (1), and *full control* (2). In regression analyses, individuals with no schedule control are the omitted/contrast category. This

Table 1. Distribution of Responses to Work–Family Role Blurring Items and Index

Items	Total (*N* = 1,075)
Contacted outside of work	
(1) Never	26.64
(2) Less than once a month	28.95
(3) Once a week	20.81
(4) Several times a week	16.25
(5) One or more times a day	7.35
M (*SD*)	2.486 (1.244)
Multitasking on work and home tasks	
(1) Never	39.02
(2) Rarely	28.52
(3) Sometimes	21.97
(4) Frequently	10.50
M (*SD*)	2.039 (1.015)
Thinking about work	
(1) Never	11.08
(2) Rarely	22.25
(3) Sometimes	40.37
(4) Frequently	26.30
M (*SD*)	2.818 (0.947)

Note: Unless otherwise specified, the numbers in the table reflect percentages

question captures the conceptualization of schedule control offered by Golden (2001): the extent that workers have control of the start and/or finish times of work (also see Jacobs & Gerson, 2004).

Decision-making latitude. Two items assess decision-making latitude: "How often do you make decisions on what needs to be done?" and "How often do you have the chance to solve problems?" Response choices are *never* (1), *rarely* (2), *sometimes* (3), and *frequently* (4). We averaged the items; higher scores indicate more decision-making latitude ($\alpha = .66$). This measure has been used in previous published research (Schieman et al., 2009)

Job authority. We use four items to measure job authority: Do you influence or set the rate of pay received by others? Do you have the authority to hire or fire others? Do you supervise or manage anyone as part of your job? And, if "yes" to the last question: Do any of those individuals supervise or manage others? We coded *yes* responses as 1 and *no* responses as 0. We summed responses such that higher scores indicating more authority ($\alpha = .73$).

Excessive work pressures. We asked: "In the past 30 days, has anyone at work made *too many* demands on you?" If participants reported "yes" to any of these items then we asked about the role-set source: "Was it a supervisor, someone you supervise, customer/client, coworker, or someone else at work?" Participants were able to choose any source and describe its frequency: *rarely* (1), *sometimes* (2), and *frequently* (3). We coded those who reported *none* as 0. Then, we asked a second question: "How often do the demands of your job exceed those doable in an 8-hr workday?" Response choices are *never* (0), *rarely* (1), *sometimes* (2), and *frequently* (3). We standardized and averaged these items to create the work pressure index ($\alpha = .74$).

Higher status work aspirations. We use a measure of *higher status work aspirations* as a proxy for work-role identification. Respondents were asked three questions regarding their current and future job: "How important is it for you to be in a job that has more prestige or respect than your present job?," "How important is it for you to be in a job that has more power or influence over other people than you now have?," and "How important is it for you to be in a job that has more financial rewards than your present job?" Response categories are *not at all important* (1), *somewhat important* (2), and *very important* (3). We summed and averaged responses such that higher scores indicate more work aspirations ($\alpha = .70$).

Control Variables

Work hours. Participants were asked about the total number of hours of paid work in a typical week. We contrast the modal category of "40 to 49 hr/week" with "fewer than 40 hr/week" and "50 or more hr/week" in regression analyses.

Occupation. To assess occupation, we asked participants about the job title of the "main job at which you worked last week." This question refers to their main place of employment; that is, the one that participants spend most time at. We also asked about some of the main duties to more accurately code responses. Using the open-ended information provided, we coded responses into five main categories in accordance with the Bureau of Labor Statistics codes. These include "professional" (managerial and professional specialty occupations), "administrative" (technical, sales, and administrative support occupations), "service" (service occupations), "craft" (precision production, craft, and repair occupations), and "labor" (operators or laborers). In regression analyses, we use *professional* as the contrast/reference category.

Personal income. Income is assessed with the question: "For the complete year of 2004, what was your total personal income, including income from all of your paid jobs, before taxes?"

Education. Education is coded as (1) *some high school but did not graduate*, (2) *high school graduate or GED*, (3) *specialized vocational training or some college*, (4) *Associate's degree* (*2-year program*), (5), *college graduate* (*BA or BS*), and (6) *post graduate—advanced degree* (*MA, PhD*).

Gender. We use dummy codes for *men* (0) and *women* (1).

Marital status. We use "married" as the omitted reference category and contrast against "never married" and "previously married" in regression analyses.

Children in the household. This is coded as the presence of children under 18 living in the household (1) versus no children in the household (0).

Race. We contrast *White* (1) versus all *other categories* (0).

Age. Age is coded in years.

We briefly explain our rational for the inclusion of controls in the regression analyses. Gender, age, marital status, and race are basic control measures found in most work–family interface research. Studies examining the main effects of gender on work-to-family conflict have found mixed results. Two national U.S. surveys found that men report a higher but nonsignificant level of WFC than women, whereas another indicates a significantly lower level among men (Bellavia & Frone, 2005). Similarly, age is found to be associated negatively (and linearly) with work–family conflict in some studies (Mennino, Rubin, & Brayfield, 2005), whereas other studies document that middle-aged workers report the highest levels of work–family conflict (Bellavia & Frone, 2005; Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002). Additionally, education and income may have important consequences on individuals' experiences of the work–family interface. For example, the well-educated report higher levels of work-to-family conflict (Schieman, Kurashina, & Van Gundy, 2006).

Plan of Analysis

After reporting descriptive statistics (Table 2), we present multivariate analyses in Tables 3 and 4 to test our hypotheses; all analyses use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression techniques. We first examine the association between work conditions and work–family role blurring (Table 3). This involves regressing work–family role blurring as the dependent variable on work conditions, along with all control measures. Then, we examine the association between frequency of role blurring and respondents' reports of work-to-family conflict (Table 4). In Model 1, work-to-family conflict is regressed as the dependent variable on work conditions and controls. In Model 2, we include role blurring to examine its association with work-to-family conflict, as well as its potential contribution to any association between work conditions and work-to-family conflict observed in Model 1.

Table 2. Means and Proportions for all Study Variables

	Total (1,075)	*SD*
Work-to-family conflict	2.342	0.779
Full schedule control	0.192	—
Some schedule control	0.379	—
No schedule control	0.429	—
Decision-making latitude	3.560	0.654
Authority	0.863	1.189
Excessive work pressures	2.824	0.801
Higher-status work aspirations	1.771	0.544
Works fewer than 40 hr/week	0.275	—
Works 40 to 49 hr/week	0.441	—
Works 50 or more hr/week	0.283	—
Professional	0.333	—
Service	0.138	—
Administrative	0.383	—
Craft	0.067	—
Labor	0.079	—
Income	51228.44	33547.27
Education	3.648	1.532
Women	0.592	—
Children in the household	0.184	—
Married	0.631	—
Previously married	0.212	—
Never married	0.157	—
White	0.771	—
Age	46.836	12.235

Finally, to test our job resources/demands hypotheses, in Models 3 through 5, we examine job resource/demand contingencies (schedule control, decision-making latitude, pressures) in the association between role blurring and work-to-family conflict.

Results

Frequency of Work–Family Role Blurring

Tables 1 and 2 present descriptive statistics for all measures. In Table 3, we present associations between work conditions and frequency of role blurring. We find evidence that supports our prediction that those with control over the

Table 3. Regression of Work–Family Role Blurring on Work Conditions and Controls (N = 1,075)

	Work–Family Role Blurring
Focal work conditions	
Full schedule control[a]	.378*** (.061)
Some schedule control[a]	.152** (.047)
Decision-making latitude	.135*** (.034)
Job authority	.073*** (.019)
Excessive work pressures	.242*** (.027)
Higher status work aspirations	.038 (.041)
Control measures	
Works fewer than 40 hr/week[b]	−.078 (.062)
Works 40 to 49 hr/week[b]	−.211*** (.052)
Service[c]	−.096 (.071)
Administrative[c]	−.105*(.052)
Craft[c]	−.042 (.093)
Labor[c]	−.256** (.088)
Income	−.019 (.020)
Education	.055*** (.016)
Women	−.103* (.046)
Children in the household[d]	−.036 (.027)
Previously married[e]	.115* (.052)
Never married[e]	−.001 (.071)
White	.075 (.051)
Age	−.002 (.001)
Constant	−1.447
R^2	.385

a. Compared to no schedule control.
b. Compared to 50 hr or more per week.
c. Compared to professional occupations.
d. Compared to no children.
e. Compared to married.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001, two-tailed.

timing and nature of their work should experience more role blurring. In comparison to those with no control over when they start and finish work, those with "full" control report the most role blurring, followed by those with "some" control. As indicators of control over the nature of one's work, higher levels of decision-making latitude and job authority are associated positively with role blurring. We also find evidence for our prediction that job conditions that increase the permeability of the work–family boundary should be associated with more role blurring: workers with excessive work pressures

engage in more role blurring. However, we find no evidence of a positive association between higher status work aspirations and role blurring. Although they are not part of our focal predictions, several patterns among these control variables deserve brief mention. Previously married individuals, professionals, and those who work 50 or more hr/week report more role blurring than currently married individuals, nonprofessionals, and those who work 40-49 hr/week, respectively.

Work–Family Role Blurring and Work-to-Family Conflict

In Model 1 of Table 4, we observe that excessive work pressures, working more than 50 hr/week and higher status work aspirations are associated with higher levels of work-to-family conflict. Having full schedule control is associated with less work-to-family conflict in comparison to no schedule control. In Model 2, we include role blurring and find support for the greedy-role perspective: more role blurring is associated with higher levels of work-to-family conflict. In Model 2, we observe that the inclusion of role blurring strengthens the negative association between full schedule (compared to workers with no schedule control) and work-to-family conflict. Several patterns contribute to this unexpected suppression effect. First, as Model 2 indicates, role blurring is associated with *higher* levels of work-to-family conflict. Moreover, as we established earlier in the analyses with role blurring as the dependent variable (Table 3), individuals with full schedule control report *more* role blurring. Therefore, once we adjust for these counterbalancing interrelationships in Model 2, the benefits of full schedule control for lower levels of work-to-family conflict become more apparent. In other words, workers with full schedule control would report even less work-to-family conflict than those with no schedule control were it not for their greater exposure to role blurring.

In Models 3 through 5, we present significant interaction effects between job resources/demands and role blurring. In Model 3, the statistically significant coefficient for the role blurring × some schedule control term indicates that the positive association between role blurring and work-to-family conflict is weaker for individuals with some schedule control compared to those with no schedule control. Figure 2 demonstrates this contingency. The interaction between full schedule control and role blurring is not statistically significant.

In Model 4, the statistically significant coefficient for the interaction between role blurring and decision-making latitude indicates that the positive association between role blurring and work-to-family conflict is stronger for

Table 4. Regression of Work-to-Family Conflict on Work–Family Role Blurring, Work Conditions, and Controls (N = 1,075)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Work–family role blurring	—	.305*** (.030)	.362*** (.043)	.595*** (.146)	.127 (.085)
Focal work conditions					
Full schedule control[a]	−.184** (.063)	−.299*** (.062)	−.320*** (.064)	−.297*** (.061)	−.287* (.061)
Some schedule control[a]	−.059 (.048)	−.105* (.047)	−.114* (.047)	−.109* (.047)	−.096* (.047)
Decision-making latitude	−.027 (.036)	−.067* (.033)	−.073* (.035)	−.100** (.038)	−.064 (.035)
Job authority	.006 (.020)	−.016 (.019)	−.015 (.019)	−.013 (.019)	−.018 (.019)
Excessive work pressures	.381*** (.029)	.306*** (.028)	.302*** (.028)	.306*** (.028)	.310*** (.028)
Higher status work aspirations	.146*** (.042)	.134*** (.040)	.138*** (.040)	.130*** (.040)	.137*** (.040)
Contingencies					
Work–family role blurring × Full schedule control	—	—	−.052 (.070)	—	—
Work–family role blurring × Some schedule control	—	—	−.122* (.059)	—	—
Work–family role blurring × Decision making latitude	—	—	—	−.087* (.038)	—
Work–family role blurring × job pressures	—	—	—	—	.065* (.027)
Control measures					
Works fewer than 40 hr/week[b]	−.313*** (.064)	−.289*** (.061)	.298*** (.062)	.294*** (.062)	.280*** (.062)
Works 40 to 49 hr/week[b]	−.379*** (.053)	−.315*** (.051)	.326*** (.052)	.320*** (.052)	.302*** (.051)
Service[c]	.099 (.073)	.128 (.071)	.133 (.071)	.129 (.070)	.127 (.071)
Administrative[c]	−.065 (.053)	−.033 (.051)	−.031 (.051)	−.034 (.051)	−.030 (.051)
Craft[c]	−.059 (.094)	−.040 (.091)	−.042 (.091)	−.034 (.091)	−.043 (.091)
Labor[c]	.045 (.090)	.123 (.087)	.126 (.088)	.122 (.087)	.122 (.087)

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Income	.026 (.021)	.032 (.020)	.033 (.020)	.033 (.020)	.028 (.020)
Education	.017 (.016)	.001 (.015)	−.001 (.015)	−.001 (.015)	−.001 (.015)
Women	.072 (.042)	.103* (.045)	.101* (.045)	.097* (.045)	.099* (.045)
Children in the household[d]	.049 (.028)	.060* (.027)	.059* (.027)	.061* (.027)	.062* (.027)
Previously married[e]	.001 (.054)	−.034 (.051)	−.042 (.051)	−.031 (.051)	−.032 (.051)
Never married[e]	.005 (.065)	.005 (.062)	.001 (.062)	.015 (.062)	.001 (.062)
White	.060 (.052)	.037 (.050)	.043 (.050)	.040 (.050)	.036 (.050)
Age	.001 (.002)	.001 (.002)	.001 (.002)	.001 (.002)	.001 (.002)
Constant	1.187	1.628	1.670	1.745	1.563
R^2	.275	.335	.342	.341	.342

a. Compared to no schedule control.
b. Compared to 50 hr or more per week.
c. Compared to professional occupations.
d. Compared to no children.
e. Compared to married.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$, two-tailed.

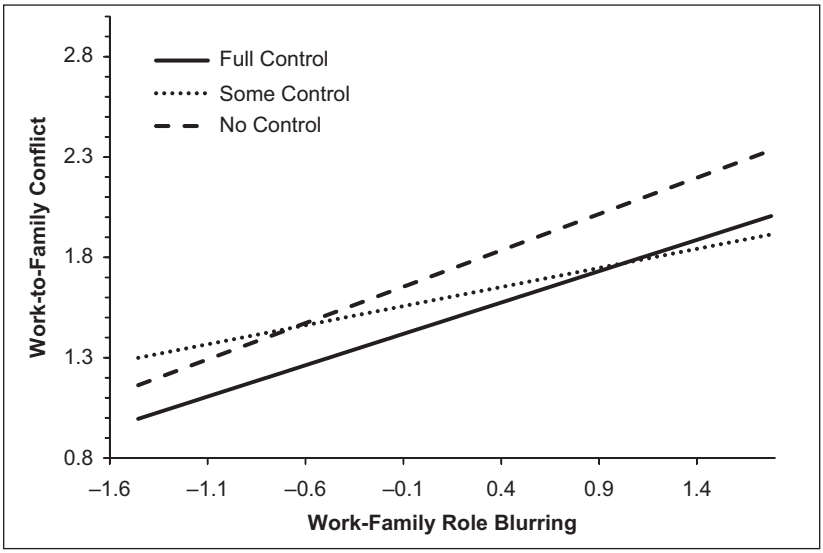

Figure 2. The association between work–family role blurring and work-to-family conflict at different levels of schedule control
Note: Predicted values shown above are derived from Model 3 of Table 4. All control variables are held constant at their respective means.

workers who have less freedom to make decisions at work. At low levels of role blurring, predicted values of work-to-family conflict are similar for those workers with the lowest and highest levels of decision-making latitude (i.e., at the 10th and 90th percentiles). However, at high levels of role blurring, predicted values of work-to-family conflict for those workers with the lowest levels of decision-making latitude are 38% higher than those with the highest levels of decision-making latitude. Put differently, for workers with more decision-making latitude, high levels of role blurring are less consequential for work-to-family conflict. Figure 3 demonstrates this contingency.

In Model 5, the statistically significant coefficient for the interaction between role blurring and excessive job pressures indicates that the positive association between role blurring and work-to-family conflict is stronger for workers who have excessive job pressures. For those workers with the highest levels of pressures (i.e., in the 90th percentile), predicted values of work-to-family conflict are 59% higher when comparing high levels of role blurring to low role blurring. In contrast, for those workers with the lowest levels of pressures (i.e., in the 10th percentile), the effect of role blurring on work-to-family

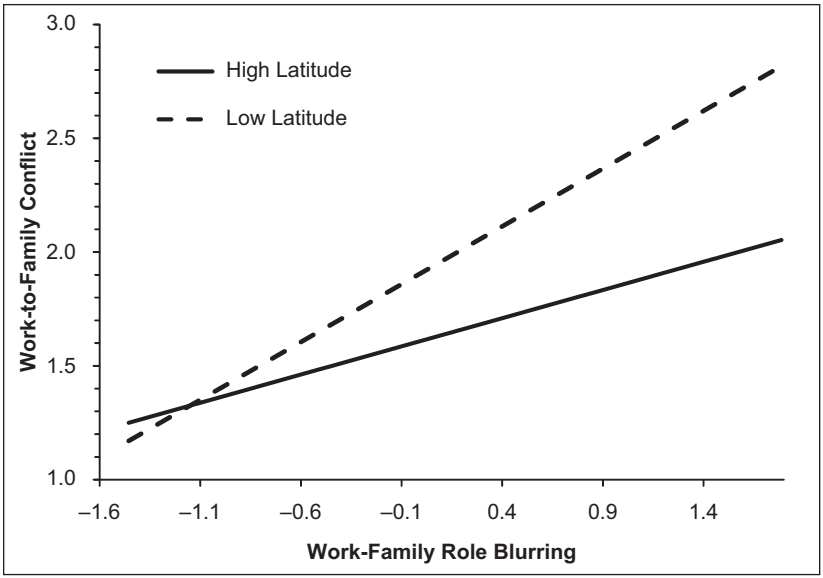

Figure 3. The association between work–family role blurring and work-to-family conflict at different levels of decision-making latitude
Note: Predicted values shown above are derived from Model 4 of Table 4. All control variables are held constant at their respective means. Low and high latitude represent the values at the 10th and 90th percentiles, respectively.

conflict is considerably smaller: predicted values of work-to-family conflict are only 22% higher for those who report high levels of role blurring, relative to low role blurring. Role blurring is therefore more consequential for work-to-family conflict among workers reporting high levels of job pressures. Figure 4 demonstrates this contingency.

Discussion

Our findings support previous research that has shown that for many individuals, the borders between work and family are increasingly blurred (Voydanoff, 2005). Examining the distributions of the three items that constitute our role-blurring scale reveals that a considerable proportion of the workers in this sample report frequent role blurring. Given its prevalence, we believe that role blurring deserves further empirical inquiry. Much is known about the conditions and consequences of role conflict, but the literature on

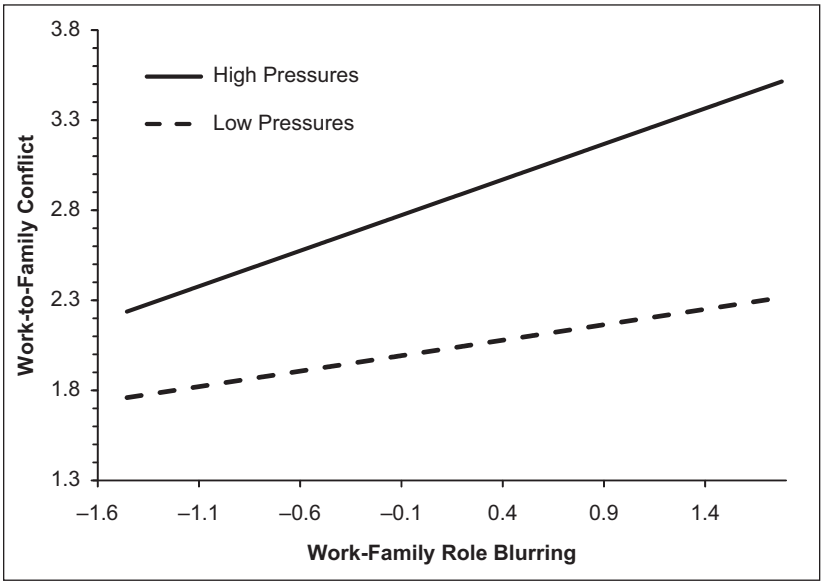

Figure 4. The association between work–family role blurring and work-to-family conflict at different levels of work pressures
Note: Predicted values shown above are derived from Model 5 of Table 4. All control variables are held constant at their respective means. Low and high pressures represent the values at the 10th and 90th percentiles, respectively.

role blurring is considerably less developed, despite a changing work–family landscape in which overlapping role domains have become commonplace for many workers.

We have found the ideas of border theory of particular value for testing hypotheses of role-blurring antecedents. In considering work conditions that influence work and family flexibility and permeability, we highlight those key characteristics of paid work that are associated with greater role convergence and blurring. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those dimensions of job control that provide individuals with the freedom to shape the work–family boundary are associated with more role blurring. At the same time, jobs that feature heavy work pressures increase boundary permeability, possibly pushing workers to blur roles to accomplish work duties that could not be completed in the workplace. These two aspects of the work role—access to job control and exposure to work pressures—are most likely interlinked. That is, jobs that offer freedom and control tend to come with the price tag of loftier work

demands and responsibilities (Schwalbe, 1985; Smith, 2002). Role blurring is therefore an active component of the *stress of higher status thesis*, whereby high-status workers who are able to actively manipulate the work–family boundary experience a downside associated with this freedom, in the form of a highly integrated work–family role set designed to accomplish work demands (Schieman & Glavin, 2008).

Nowhere is the stress of higher status thesis more relevant than for professional occupations—and we find clear support for this in our analyses. Regression analyses show that professionals report the highest levels of role blurring across all occupations; and the focal work predictors of role blurring (e.g., job control, excessive demands, authority) are all conditions that define professional work. However, despite its prevalence among professionals, we argue that role blurring is a potentially relevant experience for many other workers as well. The growing use and reliance of communication technologies across the job-status spectrum (Chesley, Moen, & Shore, 2003) also facilitate work activity outside of the workplace for workers with less status and power (computing-intensive jobs in social media, for example). Additionally, evidence of work intensification (Schor, 1993) in recent decades suggests that role blurring may become a common experience for many individuals, where stressed and pressured workers—regardless of their job status—deal with rising workloads by increasingly blurring work and family life. We find evidence of this, where excessive job pressures are associated with role blurring, even after controlling for authority, education and income, indicating that the association between job pressures and role blurring exists independent of job status.

In addition to documenting the work/family antecedents of role blurring, we also make a key contribution as one of the few studies to demonstrate the consequences of role blurring among a large, national sample of workers across a diverse range of occupations. Our finding that role blurring is associated with higher levels of work-to-family conflict provides strong evidence for the greedy-role perspective, and what other similar studies using smaller, convenience samples have found: role blurring tends to disrupt the performance of family activities and responsibilities. Our analyses also extend knowledge on the consequences of role blurring by revealing how it mediates several key associations between work conditions and work-to-family conflict.

Of all the work-related conditions examined in our analyses, however, the findings about schedule control are among the most interesting, and in some cases, unexpected. First, schedule control is associated with more role blurring. Second, the resource benefits of schedule control for work-to-family

conflict are suppressed by the fact that schedule control is associated with more exposure to role blurring. Together, these observations shed new light on an emerging paradox in the work–home interface literature regarding the resource characterization of schedule control. As Voydanoff (2005, p. 493) asserts, "the flexibility provided by resources such as . . . work schedule flexibility . . . reduces work–family conflict and perceived stress by increasing one's ability to perform work activities while also meeting family responsibilities." Yet the potential for schedule control to increase work–family role blurring underscores its complicated influence. Schedule control may well be a perk of higher status work positions, but it is also likely that it is a *necessary* condition because workers must navigate the demanding and often unpredictable nature of their work. Schedule control may provide the freedom to manipulate the work–family border, but its propensity to *blur* this border suggests that "flexibility" may contain traces of stressful role blurring demands that increase work-to-family conflict.

Our final contribution is to show how the consequences of role blurring are contingent on workers' access and exposure to job resources and demands. Given the range of circumstances within which role blurring may take place, teasing out the contextual effects of role blurring is not an easy task. The JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) offers one way in which to examine how work conditions represent positive or negative contexts that infuse role blurring with desirable or deleterious outcomes. We generally find confirmation of our hypotheses. Excessive work pressures and decision-making latitude both act as the JD-R model would predict. Work pressures exacerbate the negative effects of role blurring, whereas decision-making latitude serves to attenuate these negative effects. The resource aspects of schedule control are not so clear, however. Complete schedule control does not appear to act as a resource by weakening the deleterious effects of role blurring, perhaps a consequence of the greater expectations and demands that come with such complete freedom. Those with *some* control, however, may be best placed in that they have a degree of control over when they work and when they engage in role blurring, but without the increased work expectations that likely come with having full control.

It is also noteworthy that despite the general support for the job resource hypothesis, our findings demonstrate that individuals with job resources nevertheless experience work-to-family conflict in response to role blurring. That is, it is perhaps surprising that the association between role blurring and work-to-family conflict is not weaker or absent completely for those with high levels of job resources. Without data on reasons why individuals engage in role blurring and the ways in which they use job control, we can only

speculate as to why these job conditions do not act more like resources; however, as we have already alluded to, it is possible that schedule control and autonomy contain traces of work demands and expectations that somewhat negate or reduce their beneficial aspects. Thus, role blurring is not as "family unfriendly" for workers with job control; yet it appears that even with these highly desired work conditions, role blurring occurs at the expense of family life, rather in aid of it.

Several limitations of our research deserve brief mention. First, the cross-sectional nature of the analysis does not permit us to empirically test the causal ordering of the focal variables under examination. In the absence of longitudinal data, we therefore rely on theory to guide the temporal ordering of work conditions, role blurring, and work-to-family conflict. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that longitudinal analyses are required to more accurately verify these claims. Additionally, our analysis of role blurring is limited to blurring that occurs outside of the workplace. Qualitative research has documented, however, that role blurring within the workplace is a common occurrence for many workers (Nippert-Eng, 1996). We believe that this represents an important area for future study; particularly with regards to the issue concerning how new communication technologies might facilitate forms of family-to-work spillover. Interesting questions might be posed about whether this direction of role blurring is universally negative for the performance of work roles, or whether there may be potentially positive outcomes associated with allowing workers to blur and incorporate aspects of their family life within the workplace. The direction of role blurring may therefore play an important part in determining its impact on work and family role performance.

Conclusion

Recent changes in paid work and in the family have led scholars to consider role blurring as a reemerging work–family experience. However, existing knowledge on the antecedents of role blurring and its consequences for workers and their families is limited. Our findings contribute to this knowledge by describing the key predictors of role blurring, and the extent that its association with increased work-to-family conflict is contingent on the level of control and job pressures that individuals experience in the workplace. Future research should seek to replicate these findings with other large-scale survey data sets. Such replication is necessary to confirm role blurring as a relevant work–family experience that captures the increasingly fluid relationship between contemporary work and family life.

Appendix. Principle Component Factor Analysis (Orthogonal Rotation Matrix) With Work–Family Role Blurring and Work-to-Family Conflict Items

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Work–family role blurring items		
Contacted outside of work	.04	.79
Thinking about work	.23	.70
Multitasking on work and home tasks	.24	.74
Work-to-family conflict items		
Not enough time for family/important people because of job	.79	.19
Not enough energy because of job	.86	.04
Work kept you doing good job at home	.84	.13
Job kept you from concentrating on family/personal life	.79	.24

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Notes

1. Although other measures of role blurring tap into individual's perceptions of role ambiguity (Desrochers & Sargent, 2004) the behavioral and cognitive indicators proposed by Voydanoff (2005) offer another means through which to examine this blurring.
2. The attrition rate across Waves 1 and 2 does not differ statistically by gender, income, family composition (children in the household), or job conditions. The following statistically significant patterns were observed: compared to those who did not respond to the second survey, individuals in the second wave are more likely to have a college degree (22% vs. 17 %), are more likely to be married (58 % vs. 45 %), are older (45% vs. 38%), and are more likely to be White (77% vs. 67%).
3. The ACS is an on-going survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau that is used to produce estimates on the characteristics of the U.S. population. The study replaces the decennial Census long form, and since 2005 has collected information

from approximately 2 million addresses in the United States annually. The 2005 sample consists of 1,924,527 households with a response rate of approximately 95%.

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