How do working mothers negotiate the work-home interface?

Introduction
Workers often find it difficult to achieve work-home balance (Kreiner et al., 2009; Mayo et al., 2011) and work-home conflicts can generate undesirable consequences for both individuals and organizations. For professionals, these consequences are manifest in the form of family problems, stress, burnout, and other health problems (Grant-Vallone and Ensher, 2011; Boyar et al., 2003; Kreiner, 2006). Companies, in turn, may face high rates of turnover, absenteeism, and reduced productivity and reduced employee commitment (Allard et al., 2011; Beechler and Woodward, 2009; Ford et al., 2007). Combined, these results have fostered a growing interest in understanding the conflict and balance between work and home demands.

Recent literature reviews on work-home conflict and work-home balance (e.g., (MacDermid, 2005; Chang et al., 2010) demonstrate that the topic is studied mainly from the perspective of the conflict and that many of these studies adopt a quantitative design. Although the contribution of this dominant perspective is undeniable, it is also necessary to understand how people solve the problem of work-home conflict (Kreiner el al., 2009; Stroh, 2005). There is a lack of qualitative studies that focus on the solution (balance) rather than on the problem (conflict) (Casp et al., 2007; Chang et al., 2010). As emphasized by Kreiner et al. (2009), in the rare cases in which the process of achieving balance between these domains is studied, such studies are typically conducted from an organizational perspective. Thus, because individuals are actively subject to (rather than mere spectators of) external pressures and because they play the key role in the process of balancing work and home demands (Kreiner et al., 2009), we believe that qualitative studies that are dedicated to discovering actionable knowledge for individuals to balance work and home demands represent an important advance for this field of study.

Among the few studies that fit this perspective are the pioneering study of Nippert-Eng (1996) that examines scientists and that of Kreiner et al. (2009) that focused on Episcopal priests. In this study, we chose to study the work-home interface of mid-career professional working mothers. We chose this profile for the following reasons. First, women face serious challenges during midlife in balancing the potentially conflicting demands of their work, career, children, and elder care (Marcinkus et al. 2007; Auster, 2001). Second, there is evidence that employees make little use of flexible working option (also known as "flexi-option") policies offered by organizations (den Dulk and de Ruijter, 2008; Heywood et al., 2010) and rely more on individual tactics (Budd and Mumford, 2005), which appears to be particularly true of mid-career working mothers because previous studies have shown that stigma is attached to women who use such arrangements (e.g., O’Connell and Russell, 2005; Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Hochschild, 1997). Finally, although previous qualitative studies have explored how mid-career working mothers perceive themselves in relation to their family roles and work (Grady and McCarthy, 2008; Afzal et al., 2010), the process by which these women actively balance their work-home conflicts requires a more fine-grained examination. Thus, this study aims to explore how mid-career professional female workers negotiate the work-home interface.

This study contributes to the work-home balance literature in advancing the substantive theories of Nippert-Eng (1996) and Kreiner et al. (2009) by considering how mid-career female workers can reveal specific strategies for addressing the conflicting demands of work and home. It also contributes to the literature examining
women’s careers by focusing on individual-level strategies for balancing work and home demands. This study also answers the call for applied psychology researchers to reveal strategies that women employ who are aiming to improve their well-being (Lukaszewsvi and Stone, 2012).

**Boundary Theory**

Boundary Theory focuses on understanding how people and collectivities create, maintain, and change symbolic boundaries by classifying activities, events, places, and people in categories to simplify the world in which they live (Ashforth et al., 2000). Individuals create meanings associated with different domains of life, such as "home", "work", and "school", or associated with a role, such as "church membership" or "sportsman" and set boundaries that define the scope of each of these domains. Previous studies have used this theory to investigate how people negotiate the work-home interface and demands (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006; Kreiner et al., 2009; Rau and Ryland, 2002; Rothbard et al., 2005; Sandaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008).

Borders delimit the scope of certain domains and can be thin (weak) or thick (strong) (Kreiner et al., 2009; Nippert-Eng, 1996), depending on their flexibility and permeability. Flexibility is related to time and refers to the adaptability of an individual to meet the demands of a particular domain in a circumstance in which it is not dominant (Ashforth et al., 2000; Sandaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008). For example, when a professional working mother performs a work task at home in the evening, she is exhibiting role flexibility. In turn, permeability refers to space and can be understood as the adaptability of an individual to meet the demands from one domain in a space that belongs to a different domain (Ashforth et al. 2000; Sandaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008). For example, a professional working mother might be visited by her daughter in her workplace, which would be an example of permeability. Flexible and permeable boundaries are thin (weak) and promote a low contrast among the domains of different roles, which leads to an integration of roles. Conversely, inflexible and impermeable boundaries are thick (strong) and promote role segmentation (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Powell and Greenhouse, 2010) by contrasting the values and beliefs associated with each domain. Nippert-Eng (1996) used boundary theory to understand how people negotiate the interface between home and work and found that some individuals tend to prefer greater integration between home and work, whereas others prefer to segregate these two domains. Nippert-Eng (1996) notes that segmentation and integration are two extremes of a continuum, i.e., people can have different degrees of preference for segmentation or integration between the domains of home and work.

Like individuals, groups of people may also develop shared norms regarding flexibility and permeability between work and home (Kreiner et al., 2006). The social organizations of "work" and "home" can develop preferences that communicate different expectations about what type of boundaries there should be between the two domains (Zerubavel, 1991; Kreiner et al., 2009). Because boundaries are socially constructed, analyzing the interactions between employees and individuals who are related to the domains of "work" and "home" is useful for understanding how people balance the demands from both domains.

**Boundary Work Tactics**

Based on boundary theory, Nippert-Eng (1996) examined 72 scientists who worked in a research laboratory in the northeastern United States and introduced the concept of “Boundary Work” to describe how people construct, deconstruct, and maintain the
boundaries between home and work. Nippert-Eng (1996) also identified strategies that people use to negotiate the boundaries among these domains. Subsequently, Kreiner et al. (2009) developed a grounded theory regarding boundary work tactics. According to that study, which was built from 60 telephone interviews with Episcopal priests, individuals from home and work may have different preferences about what type of boundaries should separate work and home (Rothbard et al., 2005). When these different preferences arise, there is "Work-Home Boundary Incongruence", which can become manifest in relationships with family members, superiors, subordinates, clients, or with the demands of the job itself. These incongruities generate "Work-Home Boundary Violations", which can be of two types: a) intrusion violation, when the incongruity is based on an individual's expectation for greater segmentation; and b) distance violation, when the incongruence is based on an expectation of the individual for greater fragmentation. Based on this framework, Kreiner et al. (2009) propose that the "Work-Home Conflict" can result from both intrusion and distance violations.

According to Kreiner et al. (2009), "Work-Home Boundary Incongruence", "Work-home Boundary Violations", and "Work-Home Conflict" can be alleviated by employing “Boundary Work Tactics”, which consist of the many decisions taken by individuals during everyday life regarding the dynamics between work and home that negotiate the boundaries between these domains. Kreiner et al. (2009) identified four categories of Boundary Work Tactics: behavioral, temporal, physical, and communicative. In this study, we consider that the concept of Boundary Work Tactics has the potential to help us investigate how professional working mothers negotiate the interface between home and work.

**Mid-career working mothers and work-home balance**

Recent changes regarding employee demographics in organizations show an increase in the number of women in midlife and mid-career (Grady and McCarthy, 2008; Smith et al., 2011). These professionals are in a transition period during which they typically re-evaluate their values and selves (Wiggs, 2010; Schneer and Reitman, 1995) and must address potentially conflicting demands from their careers, children, parents, and other personal issues (Marcinkus, 2007; Auster, 2001). Therefore, many scholars have studied work-home conflict and/or work-home balance in recent years (e.g., Grady and McCarthy, 2008; Hodges, 2012; Rehman and Roomi, 2012). To help mid-career women with their work-home balance, many companies have adopted flexi-option policies (Auster, 2001) that structure organizational preferences for integration or segmentation (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Mid-career working mothers have reflected on the need to actively plan how to adjust family issues, including family structure and parenting responsibilities, such that they can better negotiate the work-home interface (Grady and McCarthy, 2008; Sujata and Singh, 2011).

As discussed above, although many organizations have adopted initiatives aimed at facilitating work-home balance (Chawla and Sondhi, 2011), previous research suggests that many women avoid taking advantage of such flexi-option plans because of the stigma attached to their usage (Drew and Murtagh, 2005; O’Connell and Russell, 2005). Many individual decisions and actions appear to contribute to the work-home balance of mid-career working mothers. Adopting alternative career strategies is often reported as one of those possibilities. Choosing the “career tree” strategy or building a “kaleidoscope career” are frequently considered options for women who desire greater flexibility to be able to better respond to the different levels of attention demanded in the various stages of motherhood (O’Connor, 2001;
Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2006, 2007). The “career tree” strategy consists of changing jobs or taking an extended break from work rather than climbing the linear and traditional “career ladder” (O’Connor, 2001). Alternatively, the “kaleidoscope career” concept consists of the idea that women, particularly those who are also mothers, tend to seek challenges early in their careers, balance at mid-career, and authenticity in late career (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). Lowering expectations for promotion (Chusmir, 1982) and considering the impact of their decision on others, including family members (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005), are additional examples of individual initiatives to promote work-home boundaries. Despite the important contribution that these studies have generated thus far, there remains a need to explore micro-level actions that help working mothers achieve work-home balance.

Methods
Given the objective of this study, we conducted 63 qualitative interviews with Brazilian mid-career urban professional working mothers. In Brazil, women represent 42% of the workforce, and there is a growing effort from the Brazilian government and companies to create conditions so that mothers can better address work and motherhood simultaneously. In general, in Brazilian culture, mothers can work, although men are expected to be the providers (Portal Brasil, 2013). The criteria for sampling in this study were women with the following characteristics: a) they are reconciling parenting with full-time work during their adult lives; b) they are between 37 and 55 years of age—an age typically acknowledged to characterize mid-career; and c) they have at least one child under the age of 18, in a dual-career household. Similar criteria were adopted in previous qualitative studies with mid-career professional working mothers (e.g., Grady and McCarthy, 2008; Afzal et al., 2010). We based our sample size on the principle of theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), i.e., we continued sampling and analyzing data until new interviews revealed no new boundary work tactics. The interviews, with an average duration of 85 minutes, were transcribed and their content analyzed.

The first subjects of the study were sourced through convenience. Mid-career working mothers known to the authors were asked to participate in the study. We then adopted the snowball sampling technique (Heckathorn, 1997) and asked these participants to recommend other women that suited the sampling criteria of the study, which resulted in successive waves of data retrieval.

The sample demographics were as follows. The average age of the study participants was 42. The following industrial sectors were represented in the sample: utilities (14), technology (11), construction (8), manufacturing (7), advertising (5), consumer products (4), transportation (3), entertainment (3), chemicals (3), healthcare (2), hospitality (2), and mining (1). Most of the women interviewed lived in Rio de Janeiro (44), but women in other large Brazilian cities were also included, such as São Paulo (9), Vitória (7), Porto Alegre (2), and Belo Horizonte (1).

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured script adapted from Kreiner et al. (2009). Participants were mainly asked about how they negotiate the work-home interface, emphasizing the micro-level of interactions. Table 1 shows sample questions that were used to explore the research topic. Because the interviews were semi-structured, we also asked impromptu questions that originated from the particular interaction with each participant, which allowed us to explore the interviewee’s experiences in greater detail.
Table I. Sample questions from the interview protocol.
The transcribed interviews were content-analyzed (Bardin 1977; Krippendorff 1980).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Challenges regarding work-home balance</td>
<td>What things in your life do you find you need to work especially hard on to balance? How do you balance them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Individual preference for interaction/segmentation</td>
<td>Some people like to separate their work and home lives while others prefer to integrate them. How would you describe yourself in that regard? Do you ever do work at home? Does your family life ever enter into your work? Are there particular things you actively try to keep separate?... integrate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Environment (family and company) preference for integration/segmentation</td>
<td>Do you have frequent interruptions (a) when at home; (b) while at work? Is it a problem? Do you have tactics or strategies for dealing with that? Do the demands of work ever take away from your home life? Do the demands of home ever take away from your work life? Are there certain people who either respect your work-home boundary or don’t? Have there been times when others did not respect the boundary you were trying to keep? How did/do you deal with that? Have you found that there are certain things you can do to maintain the work-home boundary to your liking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Boundary work tactics</td>
<td>Are there any other issues that you’ve thought of during our interview that you think might be important for me to know about regarding the topics we’ve discussed today?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
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In the analysis, we initially focused on coding the emerging boundary work tactics. The content analysis included counting code frequencies. Similar words or phrases used to code the tactics were grouped. When new interviews revealed no additional boundary work tactics, we stopped sampling and classified the tactics that we found into four different dimensions. Thus, the analysis allowed us to identify the tactics that the participating women use to negotiate the work-home interface and compare the dimensions in which those tactics can be classified with those found in previous research (Kreiner et al., 2009).

Findings
In this section, we report our findings and introduce the boundary work tactics that emerged from the data. In general, 52% of the interviewees showed a preference for segmentation between work and home. Of the remaining participants, 29% declared that they prefer to integrate these domains, and 19% indicated that their preference regarding integration or segmentation depends on the situation. Following Kreiner et al. (2009), we classified the tactics found into four dimensions: behavioral, temporal, physical, and communicative. Table 2 describes these dimensions and reports the percentage of respondents’ references to each tactic.

Table 2. Work-home boundary work tactics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Respondents reference to theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavioral tactics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using other people</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>Utilizing other people to facilitate boundary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using technology</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>Utilizing technology to manipulate the boundaries between work and home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting priorities in advance</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>Defining a-priori important work and home issues and people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Temporal tactics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing work/home time</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>Manipulating plans by banking time or blocking off segments of time for gaining flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding respite</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>Isolating oneself temporarily from work and home demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchronizing tasks</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>Dealing with work and home related tasks at once</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical tactics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulating physical boundaries</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>Setting or lifting physical limits between work and home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulating physical distance between domains</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>Approaching or distancing the physical spaces of work and life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing physical objects</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Separating or blending work and life domains by managing tangible artifacts such as photos, clothes and make-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communicative tactics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting expectations</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Communicating in advance what is a work-home boundary violation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating expectations</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>Interacting with others in order to negotiate an agreement regarding the work-home boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronting violators</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Correcting the violator(s) of work-home boundaries</td>
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Behavioral Tactics
Behavioral tactics are social practices that are used to decrease work-home conflicts (Kreiner et al., 2009). In this study, we found three types of behavioral tactics: using other people, using technology, and setting priorities in advance.

Using other people
The most cited tactic was the use of other people—including spouses, children, co-workers, and assistants—as filters to avoid undesired demands from work or home. Using other people to perform activities such as answering phone calls, for example, helps working mothers avoid wasting time unnecessarily. When using this tactic, our interviewees reported that they communicate to the helping person certain topics that should not be filtered, as shown in the following quotes:

My 15-year-old daughter always answers the phone calls I receive, and she is supposed to say that I am not available, unless it is my boss on the phone.
When my younger son calls me at work, my secretary talks to him for a few minutes. Most of the time, that’s what he needs to be satisfied. I only get the call when it is a health issue.

One important finding is that the mothers reported that the husband is the main helper at home, whereas young children often demand help from other people at work.

Using technology
Based on our data, the active management of technology for manipulating boundaries between work and home was another frequently used tactic. Recent technological advances such as e-mail and cell phones can facilitate boundary violations and promote a desired integration of home and work (Boswell and Olson-Buchanan, 2007; Fenner and Renn, 2010). The following quotes support this view:

I need to be available to my two children all day. I can’t talk all the time to them, but sometimes they write me an e-mail or a phone message or just say something in an online chat. It’s a good way to answer to their needs without exposing myself to other people at work.
I like to separate work and family issues, and I use technology to help me do this. I have two different e-mail accounts and two different cell phones, one for work and the other for personal issues. When I am at work, I avoid accessing my personal e-mail and answering calls on my personal cell phone. When I get home, I do the opposite. It helps me keep things separate.

These quotes reveal that both integrators and segmentors can benefit from using technology for negotiating the work-home interface. Mothers with teenage children who prefer to integrate the work and home domains were particularly emphatic about the importance of technological tools for balancing these conflicting demands.

Setting priorities in advance
Many of the participants reported that they manage boundaries between work and home by allowing differential permeability. They set priorities in advance and tell others who help them find balance which people to filter and which issues are allowed to cross the boundaries:

My son knows exactly who are those to whom he will say I am available when he gets a phone call on Saturdays.
We just hired a new babysitter, and we told her that when I am at work she has to resolve everything at home. However, if there is any health problem, I want her to let me know.
Health issues were reported as the most common home topic allowed to cross the work boundary, and the supervisor was the work-related person most commonly allowed to enter into the home domain.

**Temporal Tactics**

Time is a finite personal resource. Therefore, balancing work-home demands temporally involves a trade-off in choices between these domains (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000; Wayne et al. 2004). Temporal tactics are strategies that are used to maximize the effectiveness of the use of time to ameliorate time-related conflicts that occur when the demands from home and work interfere with one another and cause imbalance. We identified three types of temporal tactics: managing work-home time, finding respite, and synchronizing tasks. Each of these tactics is explored below.

**Managing work-home time**

Mid-career working mothers must address time-demanding and time-consuming events, both at work and at home. Annual planning, delivering the results for projects, and preparing for audits are examples from the workplace, whereas surgery, a birthday party, or a child’s physical or psychological problems are examples from the home. The interviewees reported that they change their routines and manipulate plans by banking time or blocking off segments of time to gain flexibility in attending to these concentrated demands on their time.

“It’s like I had one bank account with my family and another with my boss. Sometimes I have to withdraw something from those accounts, so I have to be in credit with both of them. You get credits when you go beyond their expectations, when you reserve them a significant amount of time when it’s important to them.

You can be in debt with your children, but if you are in debt with your boss, it will bring you problems that will affect both work and home. I need money.

Overall, the interviews suggest that the use of this tactic reveals a constant debit in the home bank account. Despite the fact that most withdrawal events come from home, particularly regarding health issues, work generally takes priority when a constant debit of time dedication may generate immediate problems, such as losing one’s job.

**Finding respite**

Isolating oneself temporarily from work and home demands is another temporal tactic reported by the participants. Consistent with previous studies (Kreiner et al., 2009; Sonnentag, 2003), we found evidence that taking breaks from both work and home can ameliorate work-home conflicts. For example,

“Once a month, I go alone to the beach, and I spend an entire day there. It’s my day. I leave my children with my mom or someone else who I trust. No phone calls, no internet, just me and me. It gives me energy for starting again.

Many interviewees stressed the importance of help from others when adopting this tactic. When this tactic is put in practice at times when the mother would typically be at home, it involves assigning someone such as the husband, grandmother, or a babysitter to take care of some home activities.

**Synchronizing tasks**

Daily urgent activities that are related to work and home are occasionally expected to take place concurrently. When neither activity can be prioritized because both are urgent, some working mothers address tasks from both domains simultaneously—when it is possible. The use of this tactic is illustrated by the following representative comment:
Ever since I had my first daughter, I developed the ability to do different things at the same time. Today, I am able to talk to my younger daughter on the phone at work while I am typing something on the computer.

Physical Tactics
The physical characteristics of the work-home interface change continually over time (Richardson, 2006). After the industrial revolution, the workplace was associated more with places away from home, such as factories and offices (Kreiner et al., 2009). Currently, many people are again using the work-at-home model, whereas others continue to physically separate home and work. Physical boundaries can be a wall, a door, clothes, or a gesture, and they can be manipulated both physically and symbolically (Hewitt, 2003). This idea follows the view of the world as socially constructed by the interactions between people (Mead, 1934), which is the perspective adopted in this study. Furthermore, we discuss the three tactics found in this dimension: manipulating physical boundaries, manipulating physical distance between domains, and managing physical objects.

Manipulating Physical Boundaries
Our data reveal that boundaries between work and home are not static. Some of the mid-career working mothers who were interviewed reported that they set or lift physical limits between work and home at will, as described in the following:

The company offered me a home office to work in during the mornings, but I was reluctant because I like to keep work and family separate. Nevertheless, I decided to do it because it would allow me avoid the traffic rush and save more time for the family. So today, I work at home, but things are still separate. I lock the door when I am working at home so that my children know that they cannot just knock on the door when I am there.

In this case, the door is symbolically set as the physical boundary between work and home; when it is physically manipulated by the interviewed mother, her children interpret the message (once they have been taught what that symbol stands for). Other physical boundaries such as turning off the cell phone and changing instant messenger status from “online” to “busy” were also reported.

Managing Physical Distance between Domains
Managing the space between work and home creates the possibility for segmenting or integrating work and home. Following Kreiner et al. (2009), our data suggest that integrators can choose to live closer to the workplace, whereas mothers who prefer segmentation between the work and home domains often create distance between the domains by living farther away from the work building, as suggested by the following quotes.

I need work and home to be close, so I can balance it all. This year I started working for a new company; I moved to an apartment that is closer than the other where we used to live. My children are now studying in a school that is just two blocks away from the company. Having my family close to my work is a big help in keeping everything balanced.

We rented an apartment that is intentionally far from the company. We wanted this distance to be a natural boundary.

Managing physical objects.
An object is something that can be reached, approached, and grasped; in addition, people can act toward an object. It is carved out of experience by action and is not
something whose essence is given; instead, its meaning is socially constructed (Hewitt, 2003). Objects can be manipulated socially and can become symbols of the home and work domains. One working mother described how she uses family pictures, drawings, clothes, and make-up to negotiate the work-home interface.

My desktop background is a picture of my family. I have a lot of pictures of them and drawings from my son at my workstation. It’s a way to show everybody that they are in my mind all the time. I don’t do anything related to work after 5 pm, so when I get home after work, I change my clothes, my make-up, everything. I don’t want anything that reminds me of working.

The description above is an illustrative example of how objects become social and mediate interaction when people actively assign meanings to them that help communicate the boundaries between work and home to others. Other objects, such as wallets, hairstyles, and earrings were also found in our data as symbolic means of managing work-home boundaries.

Communicative Tactics
Individuals exhibit preferences regarding integration or segmentation between domains; even when they continually interact with others, they communicate with others about their preferences regarding the boundaries between work and home. Our data revealed three ways in which this communication can be undertaken: setting expectations, renegotiating expectations, and confronting violators.

Setting expectations
Many of our interviewees revealed that they adopt a strategy of communicating in advance what constitutes a work-home boundary violation to people from work and family members. The following quotes provide examples of this boundary work tactic:

Every Saturday morning is my time to take care of myself, and everybody knows that. My family knows that, my boss knows that. It’s very clear to them.

My team knows that my daughter has some health problems, and when she is in crisis, I can’t work extra hours at night. We negotiated this.

Some of the women that participated in this study reported that they negotiated some aspects of the boundaries between work and home during their application process. This negotiation occurred not only with HR staff but also with family members—particularly children and husbands—and highlights the co-constructed character of work-home boundaries after the preferences of salient others from both home and work are considered during the construction of the boundaries.

Renegotiating expectations
As expectations (even formally set expectations) can change over time, sometimes it is necessary to renegotiate such matters. This process is not simple because such agreements may disfavor the person with whom the renegotiation is made.

Talking to my family, my boss, and my co-workers helps a lot. Sometimes I have an important appointment at my son’s school, and I try to make an agreement with someone at work or with my husband so I can be there. Sometimes nothing works, and I have to promise my children that we will do something else on the weekend.

Confronting violators (by oneself or using other people)
Our data also revealed that when the boundary between work and home is violated, even by intrusion or distance, confronting the violators is an important tactic used to force people to change their behaviors and re-establish the work-home balance. The
following sample quote illustrates this idea:

Sometimes you have to tell people that they have crossed the line. Sometimes my husband calls me too much when I am working or my children want my attention while I am still working at home. Sometimes, it's my boss that calls me on Sunday. In all these cases, I have to remind them where the line is.

Discussion and Conclusions

Despite their important contributions regarding the work-home balance of mid-career working mothers, previous studies have focused on stable individual differences or contextual factors rather than exploring how women attempt to negotiate the work-home interface. In this study, we aimed to fill this gap based on a social construction viewpoint. The investigation made by Nippert-Eng (1996) established the groundwork for the idea of boundary work, whereas Kreiner et al. (2009) found specific boundary work tactics adopted by Episcopal priests. Here, we explored the tactics that mid-career working mothers employ.

Although we were open to the emergence of new dimensions, all the tactics we found could be classified into the four dimensions (behavioral, temporal, physical, and communicative) established by Kreiner et al. (2009), which reinforces the theoretical sufficiency (Charmaz, 2006) of the grounded theory developed in that study. As expected, most of the tactics included in these four dimensions were similar to those found by Kreiner et al. (2009) and Nippert-Eng (1996); however, some of the tactics found in this study can be viewed as an advance in the boundary work literature, such as “Setting priorities in advance”, “Synchronizing tasks”, and “Renegotiating expectations”. The similarity between the tactics found in this study and those found by Kreiner et al. (2009) with Episcopal priests and by Nippert-Eng (1996) with scientists suggest that these studies together have revealed a list of typical boundary work tactics utilized by different groups of people.

The social construction view adopted in this study appears to present an interesting possibility for the study of work-home conflict or balance. As posited by Kreiner et al. (2009), the work-home balance or conflict is a generalized emotional state that is result of the accumulation or succession of negative or positive daily affective events that individuals experience (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996; Ashkanasy et al., 2002a; Ashkanasy et al., 2002b). In this paper, we followed the idea posited by Kreiner et al. (2009) of positioning the work-home conflict and balance as opposite ends of a continuum, although we are aware that there is no consensus about this understanding in the literature. Successive instances of boundary violation give rise to a state of work-home conflict, whereas boundary work tactics can be an alternative for actively constructing the work-home balance generalized state (Kreiner et al., 2009). This paper explored the idea presented by Kreiner et al. (2009) that the separation of a specific event (boundary violation) from a more generalized state (work-family conflict) might foster a more focused understanding of how the conflict is produced and overcome.

The symbolic interaction present in boundary work tactics is essential for understanding how such tactics work. The link between a symbol and its meaning requires that people make the connection. The interpreter must learn what the sign signifies so that he can make the connection that enables the symbolic interaction (Hewitt, 2003). For this reason, communicative tactics are essential such that physical tactics, such as manipulating physical boundaries and managing physical items, can be of practical use. Although people can learn the shared meanings of social objects by experience, the physical boundary work tactics that are reported in this study
address symbols that are intentionally constructed to negotiate the work-home interface and, as such, are shared only by people involved in that interaction. Co-workers and family members constitute a group of symbol users that have agreed upon the meaning of the symbols, which were produced at will.

This study offers important contributions not only to the work-home balance literature but also to the specific case of mid-career working mothers. Although many interviewees reported a preference for segmenting work and home issues, most of the participants showed a preference for integrating the two domains, which appears to result from the increasing challenges that these professionals face in managing their time and roles related both to work and home (Fine-Davis et al., 2004). As stated by Kreiner (2006) and Nippert-Eng (1996), workplaces, homes, and the people who populate them can also express their own preferences for segmentation or integration. When the preferences of individuals are aligned with the environmental influences of people in the workplace and home, this combination produces a state we call work-home boundary congruence. Our data, when aligned with previous studies (Auster, 2001; Scandura and Lankau, 1997), suggest that husbands, children, and companies are becoming more flexible and are creating more integrative work-home environments, which enables mothers to adopt tactics that promote work-home balance. However, many participants reported that the programs implemented by companies to help individuals achieve work-home balance focus little attention on gender specificities, and the division of domestic responsibilities remains tilted toward the working mother, as stated by Grady and McCarthy (2008).

In summary, this study presents mothers as dynamic social actors who are able to produce successive social events that can help them achieve work-home balance. We listed a group of tactics that were classified into four dimensions and that are typically employed by some our interviewees to negotiate the work-home interface. Behavioral and communicative tactics are useful for negotiating the expectations of significant others and correcting boundary violators. Time is also a critical factor in this process because it represents a limited and valuable resource that is required to meet both work and home demands. Our results also highlight the importance of being aware of the possibilities of actively creating symbols that act as boundaries between work and home.

**Limitations**
The findings reported in the present study must be considered in light of the limitations regarding its qualitative nature. Although our large sample allowed us to saturate the categories, our results should not be generalized. The tactics presented in this study are limited to the Brazilian cultural context; samples from other countries might reveal different boundary work tactics.

**Future Research**
In future research, longitudinal studies might explore how boundary work tactics change during and with lifecycles. In addition, further investigations might explore how group differences between working mothers, such as the age of the children (e.g., whether small children or teenagers) affect boundary work. Additional research might also investigate the interplay of tactics and the potential synergic effects of their simultaneous adoption. Future quantitative research could also be performed to test the Boundary Work Tactics model created by Kreiner et al. (2009). For that to occur, a set of measures must be developed.
Practical implications
The findings of this study have practical implications for mid-career working mothers and organizations. At the individual level, the tactics found can be put into practice by working mothers who want to actively balance their work and home demands. At the organizational level, HR managers should make efforts to consider how to develop work-home balance programs that are valuable not only to mothers who express a preference for segmentation but also to those who prefer to integrate their work and home domains. This advice appears to be important because most of these programs take it for granted that balancing work and home is a matter of allowing people to physically and temporally separate these domains (Nipper-Eng, 1995; Kreiner et al., 2009). Our data, however, show that the process of balancing work and home should consider the individual preference for integrating or segmenting these domains.

Another important suggestion is that organizations should consciously define and communicate a preference for any point along the integration/segmentation continuum, such that people can learn and act according to these organizational expectations. Once a work-home conflict arises due to differences between individual and organizational preferences regarding the integration/segmentation of work and home, adopting, and communicating practices might help people be conscious of possible conflicts and choose specific boundary work tactics to negotiate these differences. In addition, the boundary work tactics presented here can be taught in work-home balance programs as possible individual level strategies for mid-career working mothers.

Family members can also learn from this study. Because their boundary preferences for integration or segmentation between the home and work domains directly affect the probability that a work-home conflict would occur, we believe that the boundary work tactics found in this study should be presented to and discussed with family members. Understanding these tactics can help these people understand their roles in the process of achieving balance between work and home.

References


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