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ABSTRACT

The generalization of fulltime telework and later on hybrid work from the Covid-19 crisis onwards deeply challenges our understanding of work-life balance arguments associated to telework. In this context, the present contribution shows how work-life balance is the result of a continuous re-regulation process of private and professional norms, going beyond the concrete level of re-regulated spaces, activities, roles and times. Using a longitudinal qualitative method made of interviews and self-reported diaries of 13 employees and managers on a one-year period, we seek to understand how this re-regulation may also be understood as part of a resistance process aiming to accommodate work and private duties and concerns "at the right place" and often "at the right distance" but also "at the right time". To do so, we analyze the making of these re-regulations, addressing the following question: how work-life balance is shaped and re-regulated in the covid-19 work context (including micro-politics of the workplace – home - and of working times)?

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Considering the micro-politics of times and spaces through the re-regulation of work-life balance in the context of the (post-)covid hybrid work.

Michel AJZEN¹, Stéphanie COSTER, Laurent TASKIN and Laurianne TERLINDEN

The generalization of fulltime telework and later on hybrid work from the Covid-19 crisis onwards deeply challenges our understanding of work-life balance arguments associated to telework. In this context, the present contribution shows how work-life balance is the result of a continuous re-regulation process of private and professional norms, going beyond the concrete level of re-regulated spaces, activities, roles and times. Using a longitudinal qualitative method made of interviews and self-reported diaries of 13 employees and managers on a one-year period, we seek to understand how this re-regulation may also be understood as part of a resistance process aiming to accommodate work and private duties and concerns “at the right place” and often “at the right distance” but also “at the right time”. To do so, we analyze the making of these re-regulations, addressing the following question: how work-life balance is shaped and re-regulated in the covid-19 work context (including micro-politics of the workplace – *home* - and of working times)?

Flexible work has strongly developed the last decades, gathering a wide array of practices, ranging from work schedule flexibility to teleworking from different places (a.o. home, satellite offices, co-working spaces, third places) but also including office designs (De Menezes and Kelliher, 2011; Kingma, 2018). This spatiotemporal flexibility is often depicted as challenging the traditional vision of a work performed at the office during business hours, offering new opportunities to manage both working and domestic activities from a large range of times and places (Weathley, 2012; Eurofound, 2018; Ajzen, 2020). Parallel to the positive outcomes linked to this flexibility, such as better concentration, motivation, satisfaction, time saving, productivity or a feeling of accomplishment (see in particular Martinez-Sanchez *et al.*, 2007; Pyöriä, 2011), studies have highlighted the pitfalls in terms of work-life balance, including e.g. the increase of domestic-related stress (Tremblay and Thomsin, 2012; Weathley, 2012) and family conflicts (Cavazotte *et al.*, 2014; Adisa *et al.*, 2017) or the extension of working hours (Eurofound, 2016; Smith, 2016). Furthermore, new working pathologies emerge from the intensification of connectivity such as forms of *workaholism* (Barley *et al.*, 2011), *infomania* (McLennan, 2008) or *zoom fatigue* (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020).

The work-life balance issue is at the crossroads of the multiple possible combination of times and spaces to perform both work and non-work activities (Delanoije *et al.*, 2019). Previous research on telework have shown how both private and working spheres cross each other while working from home, and how workers make use of *rites of passage* to move from one to another, taking on the specific role associated to each sphere (Fonner and Stache, 2012). Different strategies are used to (re)build – sometimes temporarily – boundaries between spheres, such as dedicated workspace at home, time markers to separate activities, ICTs to manage efficiently work and non-work activities in times and spaces. Although this suggests a segmentation of activities over time (Steward, 2000), Wajcman (2018) shows how the

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increasing commodification of time in our Society leads to a temporal density materialized by multi-tasking activities. Time would be more polychronic than monochronic involving to *juggle* to combine both spheres (Wajcman, 2015), with a strong gender dimension in this regard (see e.g. Hilbrecht *et al.*, 2008; 2013; Galvez *et al.*, 2018).

While organization studies often depict time as clock-based, universalized and objective, Johnsen and Holt (2019) argue that “time is not really objective, but merely objectified subjective time” (p.1561). Based on Ricoeur’s philosophy, they approach time as a simultaneous combination of world time (episodic dimension) and human time (configurational dimension of past, present and future). This introduces the human experience of time based on struggles with the rule of the real time – supposedly objectified – involving negotiation to synchronize rhythms and temporal structures within organizations (Holt and Johnsen, 2021). For Lilja (2018), time is not neutral but rather is a matter of disciplinarity or governing. Based on a Foucauldian perspective, she shows how time, power and resistance are deeply interwoven. For instance, while one could expect that teleworkers are particularly empowered to control times and spaces during the pandemic, subsequent actions may express forms of disciplinarization. As pointed by Lilja (2018) strategies of deceleration (a.o. yoga, walk, reading) can be assimilated as a mean to better comply with the internalized norm of accelerated time. This raises the micro-politics of time by considering how actions are placed in times – and spaces – and what it reveals in terms of subjective experience, in particular, in an unique context.

Most research carried out before the covid-19 crisis thus approaches work-life balance issues in a context of a limited number of teleworking days – ranging from one to two days a week in average– and mostly focusing on work-to-home or home-to-work conflicts. However, little has been said about both the shaping and the evolution of balance between working and private spheres. The recent Covid-19 crisis has indeed brought a new form of telework for many workers: full-time and mandatory. Besides the already studied opportunities and challenges offered by spatiotemporal flexibility, this extreme form of flexibility associated with an extreme form of rigidity (inflexibility) of the context in which it takes place (confined spaces, shared spaces, colleagues’ availability, children at home...) also bring new challenges for workers. Our results show the way workers re-regulate roles, spaces and temporalities of the theoretical balance between work and non-work and the new norms which appear in this regard.

To do so, the paper is organized as follows: we first begin by outlining the theoretical background of our study in expanding the notions of flexwork and work-life balance. Subsequently, the methodology is introduced. The study is based on a qualitative longitudinal research – based on self-reported diaries and semi-structured interviews – conducted throughout the Covid-19 crisis, from May 2020 to June 2021. The participants were asked to record their experience and feelings about their professional activities and work-life balance on a fortnightly basis. Start and follow up interviews were also conducted with the view to clarifying and discussing the items reported in the diary and to uncover the meaning of what has been recorded (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977, Radcliffe, 2013, 2018). We finally analyze how these both extremes flexibility and rigidity of times and spaces re-regulate prior work-life balance.

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