Mr. Dithers Comes to Dinner: Telework and the merging of women's work and home domains in Canada

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Abstract
Studies of home-based telework by women yield mixed results regarding the usefulness of telework in facilitating work–life balance. Most research on the social impacts of home-based telework focuses on workers—employees or self-employed—who deliberately choose that alternative work arrangement. Labour force analysts, however, predict an increase in employer-initiated teleworking. As a case study of the workforce of one large, financial-sector firm in Canada, this article considers the conditions of employment of involuntary teleworkers, those required by their employer to work full-time from a home office. In-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 18 female teleworkers working for the case study firm in a professional occupation. Study participants described the advantages and disadvantages of working from home, particularly with regard to spatial and social aspects of locating work in a home setting. The gendered nature of their jobs, and the caring and supportive functions they provide both through their employment and their household responsibilities are seen to support the relocation of their jobs from office to their homes. In many jurisdictions, telework is promoted as a means of giving women more flexibility to balance their paid work with their household responsibilities; the article highlights some of the contradictions involved in moving the workplace into women's homes.

Keywords: home-based telework; women; workplace case study; work-life balance; spatial boundaries

Introduction
As originated by Chic Young in the 1930s, the comic strip Blondie™ depicted a caricature traditional American family comprised of office worker Dagwood Bumstead, his homemaker wife Blondie, and their children Alexander and Cookie. A number of the cartoon episodes—and a common occasion for family stress—occurred when, with little or no advance notice to Blondie, Dagwood would invite his boss, Mr. J. C. Dithers, home for dinner. Such intrusion of workplace into home provided a source of strain that resonated with readers. The conjunction of those two cultures does not occur easily.

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Many decades later, gender roles in the Bumstead household have changed somewhat, but the intrusion of work into home can still provide a source of tension. Recent telecommunications advances, and the resulting rise in home-based telework arrangements, have brought the workplace into an increasing number of homes. Mr. Dithers has been updated by technological changes; capital has new ways of entering workers’ homes. Some home-based workers resent the intrusion; others feel privileged to have this work option. This article reports on case study research examining the implications of the blurred boundary between workplace and home on female workers’ experience and understanding of their work and family identities. Focusing on teleworking employees from one large company, we examine instances when, at the employer’s initiative, work is moved into a home setting. Telework is defined as: ‘employer-paid work activity conducted at a location other than the corporate office and facilitated by telecommunication technologies’ (Doherty et al., 2000, p. 91). Looking at the physical arrangements of teleworkers’ home workspaces, we explore teleworkers’ views on impacts of telework on the household and the work process. The spatial reorganization—the occasion of relocation of paid work into the home setting with its requirements of unpaid work—provides an opportunity to dwell on the meanings and aspects of both those roles. The spatial aspect—with boundaries and leakage—provides a vehicle for examining meanings.

We focus on a group of professional employees within one firm—rehabilitation consultants—who were relocated from corporate head offices to home offices by a management initiative. Their jobs involved working with disability claimants to facilitate their return to work. In the case study firm the majority of rehabilitation consultants are female. (While the overall gender distribution of those employees in the firm is not known, of the list of rehabilitation consultants provided by the employer as potential study participants, 92% are female.) We restrict our investigation to female homeworkers, as previous time-budget research has indicated that gender has a significant influence on the experience of home-based work, with female home-based workers devoting significantly more of their time at home to domestic tasks (Michelson, 2000). Our research examines the experiences of these middle-class women who perform their professional jobs from their homes, considering mechanisms that they use to manage their paid and unpaid work under one roof. Following a discussion of trends in home-based work and a consideration of literature on social and spatial implications of home-based work by women, the article describes the methods and findings from this case study of telework among female employees whose home is their main work location. A concluding section considers the implications of the results for this technology-enabled and rapidly growing form of employment.

**Telework in North America**

In Canada, national surveys and large-scale workplace studies highlight the following: employment growth has been most rapid in ‘knowledge-intensive’ industries; there has been a rise in self-employment and unpaid overtime; low-paid contract work is increasing (Fudge et al., 2002); time stress is on the rise and is intensified by long commutes to work; employment demands have increased over the past decade and there is a growing level of work–life conflict among employees (Duxbury & Higgins, 2002; Johnson et al., 2001). Telework has been
identified as one possible way to reduce work–life tensions for employees in North America (Duxbury et al., 1998; Pratt, 1999; Van Sell & Jacobs, 1994).

The scale of home-based telework, much of it of the informal or ‘guerilla’ variety, is difficult to quantify. While teleworkers currently comprise a relatively small portion of the North American labour force, there is abundant evidence that this form of work is on the increase (Handy & Mokhtarian, 1995, 1996; Nie, 1999; Pèrussé, 1998; Westfall, 1997). According to US Census Bureau figures, the number of home-based workers increased 23% in the decade from 1990 to 2000, with an estimated 4.2 million Americans working full time from home in 2000 (US Census Bureau, 2004). Changing telecommunications technology allowing cheaper, faster and more secure transmission of information means increasing numbers of workers that can perform their work off-site. Growth projections, based on recent surveys and job analyses, suggest that between 25% and 65% of jobs in North America (and Europe) are at least partly telecommutable (Ekos, 1998; Empirica, 1999; Pratt, 1999; Weijers et al., 1992). Professional, technical, clerical, administrative and even managerial workers are able to perform many of their duties away from head offices. Shifting workers off-site represents a saving in facilities costs to employers, even if they pay a share of the capital and operating costs of their employees’ home offices (Kurland & Bailey, 1999). More than that, employers are impressed with the apparent increase in productivity that results from moving the workplace to the home (ibid.). The combination of fewer interruptions when working from home and lack of commute time can mean an increase in the efficiency of work (Johnson, 1996). Because it allows them some flexibility in scheduling and time savings from forgoing commuting, many workers—in particular women with family responsibilities—express enthusiasm for the home-based work option (Mokhtarian et al., 1998; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001).

New developments in telecommunications technology have recently begun to convince employers of the advantages of relocating employees to home-based offices. Now, instead of homework being simply a voluntary, employee-initiated work ‘option’, some employers are unilaterally deciding to send their workers home (Salaff, 2002). Writing in 1998 in their volume on contingent work in America, Barker and Christensen observed: ‘We are now entering an era of much more involuntary telecommuting, in which employees are given no choice but to work somewhere other than their offices’ (p. 6). This category of involuntary teleworkers, which, according to Canada’s 1995 Survey of Work Arrangements, represents some 44% of teleworking employees, raises important questions about employment policy and quality of work life (Lipsett & Reesor, 1997).

While there is a growing literature on the transportation and economic impacts of telework (Helling & Mokhtarian 2001; Henderson & Mokhtarian 1996; Koenig et al., 1996; Mokhtarian, 1998; Westfall, 1998), less is known about its social impacts. Several authors who address the social impacts of telework note its mixed reviews in the popular and academic literatures, inconclusive about whether it assists workers in balancing work and family responsibilities, or exacerbates the problem. Sullivan and Lewis (2001) contrast what they label the ‘flexibility’ and the ‘exploitation’ models of telework, while Mirchandani (2000) uses her own respondents’ more dramatic phrases to contrast two contradictory depictions of telework as ‘the best of both worlds’ and ‘cutting my own throat’.1

Basic to the modern ideal of the North American home is its separation from the world outside. As social historian Haraven (1991, p. 259) observes, following the Industrial Revolution, ‘the household was recast as the family’s private retreat, and
home emerged as a new concept and existence’. According to Dangler (1994, p. 100), who examined the recent practice of industrial homework by women in upstate New York, the historical separation of home and work ‘influenced the manner in which women were incorporated into the paid workforce’. Dangler observed that early nineteenth century pressures of industrialization ‘required a construction of women’s roles which placed motherhood and homemaking at the centre of their lives’ (ibid.). Women who worked at home for pay were deemed to be outside the sphere of ‘real’ work. Their conditions of employment were not regulated, and their numbers were rarely counted. Despite sporadic efforts at regulation, work-at-home retained its marginal status well into the second half of the twentieth century.

In recent decades this marginality has been subjected to what Allen (1983, p. 656) terms ‘serious questioning’. Nonetheless, traditional attitudes have continued to be expressed—for example, in debates in the US in the 1980s over repeal of federal restrictions on homeworking. As workers situated in the nexus between home and work domains, homeworkers’ experiences and their constructions of these realities can provide new insights about women’s work.

Recent advances in telecommunications technology have dealt a blow to the ‘separate spheres’ notion, liberating traditional office work from corporate offices—with much of it relocated into workers’ homes (Helling & Mokhtarian, 2001; Péresse, 1998). This shift raises questions about the very meaning of a home. As the home takes on new, work-related functions, what changes may occur in its patterns of use, the meaning it has to inhabitants, and its relationship to its surrounding environment? Adams (1999, p. 361), citing McLuhan (1964), observes how telecommunications technology transforms a dwelling, opening its boundaries to contact with forces outside its walls: ‘Physically the home may approach the ideal of containment, but socially it is a permeable or “leaky” capsule, with the outside world constantly coming into contact with the inside world.’

According to sociologists Michelson and Crouse (2002, p. 6), home-based work ‘locates paid work in the home, thus modifying the meaning and use of household space’. Bulos and Chaker (1993, 1995) describe two models by which homework is accommodated in a home environment. One model emphasizes the separation of employment and other home-based activities; the second involves alteration of the very idea of the home so that employment is accommodated as ‘a regular “normal activity”’ (Bulos & Chaker, 1995, p. 235). Huws et al. (1990) and Miraftab (1996) identify the separated home workspace as a typically male pattern of working at home; females are more likely to use work areas spread through the home.² Numerous authors have observed that women, because of their traditional responsibility for household and family work, face particular challenges when paid work and family and household work are co-located at home (Michelson, 1998; Mirchandani, 1999). Similarly, Baines and Gelder (2003), who studied self-employed home-based workers, would categorize the former model as ‘rigidly scheduled’ and the latter as ‘work–family inclusive’. Crosbie and Moore (2004) found differences between professional and non-professional homeworkers in the degree of challenge they felt balancing work and life commitments. They found professional women with young children felt these challenges most acutely since they tended to see their role as workers and mothers having equal demands.

Paid work in the home has a special fascination for feminist scholars, who have long been concerned to interpret as ‘work’ women’s unpaid household and family activity (Armstrong & Armstrong 1990). Shifting the workplace into the home,
as happened historically with industrial homework (Boris, 1994) and is currently happening with telework (Allen & Wolkowitz, 1987; Pérusse, 1998), raises important questions about the meaning of work, paid and unpaid, in terms of broad social definition and subjective understanding by workers (Mirchandani, 1999). It focuses attention on the role of gender in the definition of social roles.

As noted by Anderson (1996), the recent generation of technologically enabled teleworkers has deconstructed the bounded separation between home and work. Mackenzie (1999, p. 419) observed how any paid work in the home raises questions about commonly held assumptions: ‘women earning money at home are altering the form and meaning of home and community’. By removing the physical boundaries between paid work and household/family work—production and reproduction—public and private spheres—telework focuses attention on the ways gender may affect the performance of both types of work activity, paid and household work. Further, removal of those boundaries serves as a type of experiment, enabling examination of the spatial dimensions of women’s lives and the resulting changed understanding of their gender identities.

Sullivan and Lewis (2001, p. 142) compared male and female teleworkers’ experiences working from home, and found that ‘the reasons for taking up this kind of work and the ways in which it is used to manage the work–family interface are highly gendered’.

They studied the influence of gender on teleworkers’ motivations for working from home, finding that males and females constructed the family-related advantages of telework ‘in terms of the traditional role discourse’ that tends to reproduce gender inequalities (ibid., p. 133). While males and females in their study cited similar work-related advantages—such as increased independence and autonomy in scheduling of their work, they expressed different views regarding family-related advantages. Women emphasized fulfilling their domestic role and ‘satisfactorily managing their work and family obligations’ (ibid., p. 133). Males tended, instead, to talk of ‘helping’ their wives with household tasks and spending time with their children. Osnowitz (2005) encountered a similar situation. She found the second shift to be normative for women. If men tried to juggle their paid work and their domestic responsibilities, this was considered ‘breaking new ground’ (ibid., p. 99). With our sample of women whose workplace has been located in their homes, we have an opportunity to study how they negotiate what Ray and Rose (2000, p. 503) term women’s ‘hybrid identities’, as gender intersects with a variety of markers of identity related to work and family.

The Case Study

Contemporary home-based teleworkers are far from a homogeneous occupational category. Their numbers include self-employed and employees in a wide variety of occupations; some work exclusively from home, while others combine office and home-based work. Previous research on home-based work indicates that a number of factors, including: type of work; the amount of time spent working in the home; the nature of home and work environments and the control that workers have over these variables; the social class, gender and household characteristics of home workers, all affect the experiences of home workers (Gurstein, 2001). Many studies of home-based work use haphazard samples that combine homeworkers in widely varying occupational groups, including self-employed with employees.
The present study adds to the literature by examining telework as practiced within the workforce of a single, large, Canadian financial-sector firm. Furthermore, this case study provides access to a relatively unstudied group of teleworking employees with potential policy significance, namely, professional workers assigned by the employer to work from home on a full-time basis. The study provides an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of 18 female teleworkers to investigate how shifting paid work into the home may affect the employees’ understandings of their work and family responsibilities.

The focus of our work is the technology-enabled relocation of these women’s jobs from their employer’s corporate offices in urban core areas to their own suburban homes. In trying to understand the subjective meanings of computer-mediated relocation of women’s paid work into their home spaces, we have drawn upon feminist geography as it considers the relationship between gender and urban spatial structures, and the meaning that the home setting and the associated domestic roles and responsibilities have for women (England, 1993, Moore Milroy, 1991). In particular, our work has been informed by recent work on the geographies of femininities (Laurie et al., 1999) in relation to the way women’s very identities may be shaped by their experiences of the home as a work environment (Domosh & Seager, 2001). Focusing on the geographies of femininities directs us to address the social construction of the gender identities of women who combine their waged work and their family/household work within their home environment. In our case study we examine how new telecommunications technology may affect women’s employment and family roles (Laurie et al., 1999, p. 2). The home environment is viewed as a space in which teleworking women can negotiate and change their gender identities as they relate to their work and their family roles. We consider such aspects of gender identity as the ethic of care (with regard to both family and work), a focus on relationships, and expectations of domesticity. Our qualitative interviews with this group of middle-class professional women probe the ways in which characteristics of their femininity may influence their response to home-based telework as a mode of work.

All of the women in our study are employed as rehabilitation consultants, a predominantly female occupation. This job involves working with claimants who are employees on disability benefits to monitor and facilitate their progress to return to employment. The rehabilitation consultant works jointly with the employee, his or her physician, psychologist, physiotherapist, and other health care professionals who may be working with the claimant, as well as with the employer. Some of our rehabilitation consultant study participants compare their occupation to that of a social worker—a supportive and caring role towards clients who may, on occasion, be in distress. Henderson and Allen (1991), citing Gilligan (1982) describe how women tend to subscribe to ‘an ethic of care’. British telework researcher Ursula Huws (2003, p. 82) explores the ‘ideology of self sacrifice’ associated with women’s work in a variety of caregiving jobs, observing how it is seen as ‘“unfeminine” to be selfish’. We explore possible connections between the characteristics of the rehabilitation consultant job description and compatibility with the company’s relocation of these workers into offices in their own homes.

This article is organized around two questions:

1. To what extent and under what circumstances does paid work ‘leak’ into home spaces—both physically and symbolically—and what are the
meanings of this spillage, and strategies (if any) used to address or limit it? We use spatial boundaries and spillage as a framework to explore meanings. Are there ways in which these home-based workers adopt new definitions of their family and household roles?

2. To what extent and under what circumstances does family/personal/home life infiltrate workspaces—both physically and symbolically—how are these penetrations perceived, and what strategies, if any, are adopted for addressing or controlling them? In the particular employment role under study here, how does the home location of work affect job performance and job meaning as a rehabilitation consultant?

Case Study Method

The present case study of home-based teleworkers from Qualicum Life, our name for a large, Canadian, financial-sector firm, examined the impacts of telework on the use and experience of the home, and looked at how the home work location affected the nature and quality of their work life. The origins of this paper date back more than five years, when the researchers initially approached management at Qualicum Life with the idea of developing a partnership to study alternative work arrangements. Data were collected for the current study between 2000 and 2004.

We used a two-stage selection process for the study participants. The first stage was a survey of 65 male and female, professional, technical and managerial employees who completed a short electronic screening survey about their work patterns and telework arrangements. Those 65 participants were recruited through one of two methods: 1) invitations extended to employees identified by their managers or co-workers as teleworkers; or 2) a teleconference arranged during work hours by the employer and attended by some 25 potential participants who had been identified by their managers as teleworkers. In both recruitment methods it was made clear to potential participants that participation was voluntary and that participants would remain anonymous, with only the researchers having access to survey responses.

The electronic survey collected information on patterns of work and socio-demographic background, and it administered several standardized measures of quality of work and life, including time pressure and job satisfaction. In the second stage of the selection process, these participants were invited to complete a second, more intensive survey involving an in-depth interview in person or by telephone. This study’s sample represents the initial 18 female teleworking rehabilitation consultants who volunteered for that interview.

All of the 18 teleworkers involved in the present study were full-time home-based employees. The employer stipulated that they have a separate workspace with a secure door. The employer had installed a data line and dedicated phone line in the employee’s home, and paid the bill. The firm also paid up to $1500 for costs of home office furnishings. According to the terms of this work arrangement, the employee’s supervisor makes occasional visits to the employee’s home office. For purposes of security as well as to project a businesslike image, clients are not informed that the rehabilitation consultants work from home. Some of the rehabilitation consultants had originally begun their work for the company at a head office location and were subsequently relocated to a home office due to a change in corporate policy; those who joined Qualicum Life more recently were hired on the condition that they work from their homes.
The interviews were generally between one and one-and-one-half hours in duration. Interviews were structured around open-ended questions in three main areas: work–life balance; home workspaces; and general experiences with home-based work. With participants’ permission, interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were coded and analyzed using NVivo computer software to identify key themes relating to the research questions. Excerpts relating to key themes were then taken from the various transcripts.

The ages of the sampled female teleworkers ranged from 30s to 50s, with a mean age of approximately 45 years. The employer, Qualicum Life, has offices in numerous locations across Canada, and the teleworkers were based in various regions of the country. The teleworkers all lived in residential suburbs of larger metropolitan areas and in smaller cities. The participants’ annual gross family/household incomes, measured in categories, varied from about $50,000 to over $100,000, with a median category of 80,000 to $99,000. Most had a university degree, with some having postgraduate degrees, although others had only high school diplomas. In terms of household and family status, the majority of participants were living with spouses and pre-school and/or school-age children; several were ‘empty nesters’ whose children had grown and left home. Most were married; several were single/divorced/separated. The women interviewed in this study were a particularly mobile group—all were automobile drivers with ready access to cars; as rehabilitation consultants who are required to travel in connection with their work, having their own vehicle was a condition of their employment. At the time of the interviews, all participants were living and working from multi-storey, single-family residential dwellings, although one participant had previously lived (and worked) in an apartment.

Study findings are organized into two sections: leakages of work into the home, and leakages of the home into work. While there is clearly overlap between the two domains, study participants were able to describe and compare and contrast their experiences according to these categories.

**Findings Related to Leakages of Work into Home**

*Extent and Circumstances*

The participants mentioned a variety of ways in which work permeated the home environment, disrupting and displacing household members. One type of leakage involved the displacement of household space to accommodate work-related materials and equipment. Participants described instances in which the need for a home office necessitated relocation of household members’ bedrooms and other reallocation of household space. Young children doubled up in a single bedroom, a living room was transformed into an office, and a grown child attending university away from home had to relinquish a bedroom at home: ‘This was previously [my daughter’s] room … She was grievously saddened that I was sacrificing her bedroom. I literally gave away the furniture because … I had to bring in these big filing cabinets’ (Hazel5). The employer dictated specific requirements for the home office. As noted above, most of the teleworkers were required by the employer to work in a self-contained, lockable office. Interviews revealed that they tended to keep within the confines of that home office while working.

A second type of leakage of work into the home was the visual evidence of work that may spread throughout the home. Portable office equipment—laptop computers and cordless phones—made it easy for work to spread around the
The presence of office equipment distributed throughout the home served as a continual reminder to the teleworker of work obligations—even outside of scheduled work hours. Such evidence of work in the home may mean the home loses its function as an escape from the pressures and obligations of the workplace. One participant cited that as her rationale for keeping her office in the basement: ‘If it were on the main floor … it would be too easy for me just to walk in on week-ends’ (Violet).

Auditory intrusion constituted a third way in which work can leak into the home. The ringing sounds of fax machines and business telephone lines serve to remind teleworkers and other occupants of the home that the premises are also a place of work. Teleworkers expressed their resentment about such noises occurring outside of normal work hours:

Until I learned how to turn off the telephone ringer, it drove me nuts. The people we’re dealing with often are depressed, and depressed people don’t sleep, so they think they’re phoning some generic number leaving messages at 4 and 3 and 5 in the morning. I just let it ring, but then your sleep is disturbed … It was … annoying. (Rosemary)

Another participant described how she would answer her work phone whenever it rang to avoid having it wake other family members:

I couldn’t shut off my ringer, so if the phone started to ring at 6 in the morning, I would run down and answer it … So I just fly down the stairs, or sometimes I would actually leave the receiver beside my bed, so as soon as it would ring, I would answer the phone. (Violet)

Some teleworkers described how the noises of their work do disturb family members, as in the following instance: ‘The worst thing about my office is that it is upstairs and when my kids are in bed … they’ll come and bang on my door. They say “close the door”—it’s the phone ringing and me talking and the phone’ (Laurel).

The combination of visual and auditory intrusions of work into home—the ever-present ‘call’ of the company’s laptop—may exert pressure on the teleworkers to become ‘workaholics’, or at least to overwork. During an interview with one participant, a ringing telephone audible from her basement office downstairs illustrated the omnipresence of home-based telework:

What some colleagues have done who have a phone that blinks when there’s a call, is they put a towel over it so they don’t see it if it’s in their way. And I think there’s a way, but I haven’t figured out how, to actually stop it ringing … so I’ve got it on fairly low … but … it’s sort of like work is always a possibility. (Rose)

A fourth type of leakage involved physical change of the home to accommodate work. This could take the form of alteration or renovation of the home environment, installing new equipment, or removing company equipment from an employee’s home. Shelving may be added or changed, household equipment may be relocated, and new furnishings and or equipment—some of it owned by the employer—may be added. The fact that much of the office equipment in the homes of the teleworkers was owned by their employer, and could be removed or replaced at the company’s discretion, reinforced the sense of employer control over the home workspace. One participant described how the company repossessed its office equipment from a home-based teleworking colleague who
was about to begin a parental leave: ‘[Qualicum Life] took the equipment back . . .
I guess they felt they could put it to use while the employee was on leave . . .
they felt they could use the equipment in the meantime’ (Cynthia). Virtually all of those
teleworking from home required a second telephone line; the company installed
and paid for phone lines for those working full-time from home.

A final way in which work infiltrated the home environment of the teleworkers
was in the form of home visits by supervisory personnel. Most of the teleworkers
had been told to expect visits by their supervisor for the expressed purpose of
auditing randomly sampled case files. Some employees understood that such visits
also enabled the employer to check on how they had established their home office:

[Qualicum Life] gave us [an allowance] and we could do what we
wanted with it in setting up our office. We didn’t have to send in receipts
or photos, although I wonder whether the home audit visits weren’t
partly to see if we were working in a reasonable set up. (Portia)

As indicated in the following quote, some teleworkers felt uncomfortable about
such home visits: ‘They come right in here [her home office] . . . it’s a little
awkward. . . . I think there’s been someone out about four times. It’s to see the
home office set up and to go through to check things’ (Laurel). Another participant
was more explicit about the source of her difficulty with the employer’s intrusion
in her home space:

Supervisors coming for audits . . . that is something I do not like at all. . . .
Because we have a home office for a large corporation, there is a sense of
‘we own you and we own your home.’ So they could say that they
wanted to come and you didn’t have any choice about it. So, if my
husband is ill or something and had to sleep all day, I don’t have the
privilege of saying ‘I’m sorry, but you can’t come to my home.’ . . . It just
feels like a real invasion of privacy. (Daisy)

In some jurisdictions, income tax provisions may compensate workers for
allocation of residential space for work purposes. Such declaration however,
emphasizes further the idea that the home office is not regarded as living space.

Locating a work function at home affected the women’s experience of their
home environment, including feelings about arriving home: ‘I must say I have a
different sense coming in the driveway now I know that there are messages
waiting for me. If I come in off the road, the first thing that I do is go down to the
office as opposed to fixing tea . . . there’s a sense of pressure’ (Violet).

Strategies to Deal with Leakage of Work into Home

The teleworkers had various experiences of work leaking into the home—and
they used different strategies to limit such leakage. Restricting work to a
designated area within the home is one such strategy. One teleworker who almost
never took her work outside her home office, described the pleasure experienced
from a rare outdoor work session:

Once, last year because it was a calm day and I had a bunch of dictation
to do . . . I took my phone and my dictation and went out on the deck . . .
I was sitting out on my deck with the sun shining down, drinking a diet
pop and dictating into my Dictaphone. It was amazing . . . I only did that
once last summer, but it was an amazing day. (Lily)
Other teleworkers actively resisted the leakage of work into the home and used various strategies to create boundaries. They reported having given serious consideration to the location of a home office, and its position with regard to the more intimate home territory—the master bedroom. The participants felt strongly that the office should be located in the more public areas of the home, far from the intimate areas, and situated so that their work would not intrude after work hours. One participant explained how her basement office location shielded her from hearing or seeing work from her needy caseload outside her working hours:

The advantage of being in the basement is when the phone rings, which it does at funny hours in the evenings, or the fax can go off ... Some of my clients will leave messages for me at 2 o'clock in the morning because they're really upset, and they can't sleep ... I can't hear those telephone calls. And I have a psychologist that sends me reports at 12 o'clock at night. I can't hear the fax. Out of sight, out of mind. (Alyssa)

Alyssa elaborated on the importance of remote home office location as a way to mitigate pressures to be working constantly:

The other thing that I think that my husband and I did right here was we separated the office from the home ... I would get it as far away from where you live as possible. If I were here right now and my office was in our little den across the room here and I was not supposed to be working and my phone was ringing or there was a fax coming through, I wouldn't be able to leave it alone. I would have to be in there checking out what's going on. But where my office is, I have no idea what's going on down there on the weekends. I really try to stay away from it. (Alyssa)

Another study participant extolled the virtues of her office location just inside the front entrance of her two-storey home. As well as being situated as far as possible from the more intimate areas of the home, the location gave her a commanding view:

[The best aspect of this office] is that it's in the front of the house. I have a good view of what's going on outside so I can see whether someone is approaching my driveway. Or I can watch out for the kids on the street. It's very bright in there so I find I don't have to use as much electricity for lighting, and the amount of space is just perfect. (Cynthia)

One participant described how she moved to a larger dwelling in order to put more space between her workspace and her bedroom: 'I was getting tired of working out of my living room—because it was really hard to separate ... I could hear the phone ringing when I was in the bedroom and that wasn't good ... now I have a way bigger space' (Myrtle).

Some of the teleworkers emphasized putting their own personal stamp on the décor of their home office space, taking pleasure in that control, and in the fact that it did not resemble an office in the company's head office. One teleworker who renovated an upstairs storage room, gutting it to accommodate her office equipment, expressed her satisfaction with the colour she chose: 'The best thing about my home office is my walls and my colour ... it's greeney grey, a taupey green, ... I picked it specifically because it makes me happy' (Laurel). Another teleworker described with pride the beauty of her home office environment: 'It's spacious ... I have a beautiful view ... beautiful ... rug ... paintings ... plants ...
I guess it’s decorated the way I want. That’s kind of nice—I’m paying for it’ (Hazel). Still another teleworker whose employment dates back to the time the company relocated her department to home offices expressed surprise that colleagues would, voluntarily, incorporate furnishings from the head office into their own homes: ‘We were told at the office if you want to take your chair from the office, take it. You know, some people also ended up taking those ugly office desks… they are cumbersome and just don’t fit in’ (Cicely).

Qualicum Life provided teleworkers with necessary equipment and computer/phone lines, ongoing technical support, and a financial contribution towards furniture or home renovations. Most of the rehabilitation consultants’ work tasks required them to work only from their home office because of file confidentiality and the need for a docking station to dial into corporate information systems. The leakage was thus relatively contained, but the intrusion on the home landscape was significant and could result in less living space for the family because of the need for that dedicated office.

Technology may be used to help to limit the leakage of work into home spaces. For example, telephone intrusions were limited by the fact that the employer provided separate phone lines for teleworkers, allowing them to distinguish between work and personal calls, and to ignore calls on their personal lines. ‘My office is in the basement and don’t have a home line on the basement level. I can vaguely hear the home phone. But I’ve told people I just don’t answer the home phone if it rings during the day’ (Rose).

Findings Related to Intrusions of Home into Work

Extent and Circumstances

Leakage of home and household into the work domain was as much a concern to the homeworkers as leakage of work into their households and living spaces. Such leakage took several, very different forms. One way in which home ‘leaked’ into work was through distractions and interruptions while working. Without a strict set of controls, the homeworkers were subject to interruptions by family, friends and neighbours, and the distractions of home. Leakages could take the form of sights, smells or auditory cues; they could be as direct as actual interruptions from a knock at the door, a phone call, or as subtle as increased demands made on the homeworker by family members. Another source of such intrusions came from the teleworkers themselves, from visual cues in the home environment calling them to do chores or engage in other home-based distractions. The participants described a wide variety of ways that home life could intrude on their work.

At a very different level, the women described how being located in a home-based working environment resulted in their approaching their work role differently. According to the study participants, working as a rehabilitation consultant is a job that requires skill, tact, compassion and patience. Some describe it as casework; one participant emphasized this aspect of her job: ‘I’m not like not one of the people who work in a financial institution. I’m doing rehabilitation’ (Rose). As a group, the participants described how working from the privacy of a home office they were better able to deliver the services their job requires. As home-based teleworkers they were more supportive and nurturing toward their colleagues and their clients. Myrtle, an experienced rehabilitation consultant, explained her approach to the job and her motivation for the telework arrangement.
She contrasted her own level of dedication to the job with the approach of a hypothetical male rehabilitation consultant: ‘I put way more into work than would say the “average Joe” because I feel like … I’m trusted in what I do’ (Myrtle).

Some attributed the changes in the way they approached their job to the physical attributes of a home office compared with a corporate office setting. Instead of making telephone calls from a noisy, semi-public cubicle, their home offices allowed them to speak to claimants without distracting background noise. But the home setting afforded them more than a noise-free setting from which to make their sometimes difficult calls. One study participant explained how her home office location facilitated her conversations with her clients:

> Sometimes we have to do very personal interviews by phone. I previously worked in the office, and it was very difficult to develop therapeutic rapport with people when they could hear someone else talking. You know, right beside you—it can be very distracting for the client. They don’t know who can hear and it’s just difficult to develop that one-on-one relationship when you can hear your neighbour talking. (Hyacinth)

Still another echoed how, by having her workplace moved into her home, she was better able to serve her clients’ needs:

> [In the head office] we were just in little cubicles … we were getting more and more cramped … spaces where literally the person on the other side had her desk just like this [showing with her hands] and we looked at each other—we had no wall in between, so it was hard for conversation on the phone for privacy. (Fern)

A caring ethic was characteristic of our study participants’ approach to their work role and made them more likely to accept and remain in a job such as the rehabilitation consultant position that utilizes that capacity. The home office setting was conducive to focusing on the needs of clients. One participant made explicit the connection between the caring way she performed her job, her tendency to work overtime, and her home-based office location:

> In terms of my clients, I spend a lot of supportive time rather than sticking to the business at hand because I feel it is worthwhile for them, and I don’t mind doing that because I am at home … at home, I figure, well, I am at home, I am saving the time that I am driving to work and there seems to be a trade off to me. (Callista)

Numerous teleworkers cited time savings gained from avoiding the commute to head office, and indicated that they used that time for working with clients or their colleagues. One teleworker described how working from home allowed her to put in the extra time her job requires: ‘I work too much … and I work more than I should … but that’s the nature of the job. And being at home allows me to do that. Otherwise I don’t think I’d be as good at what I do’ (Iris).

**Strategies to Deal with Intrusion of Home into Work**

Participants adopted a range of spatial and temporal strategies to manage the circumstances under which home/personal life intruded into workspaces. They
were generally concerned with separating their workspace from the rest of the home, and putting limits on the amount of time they worked.

The most salient boundary management strategy was the physical separation of work from the rest of the home. Physical separation of the home office becomes a way of protecting work from family, as well as—as described above—shielding family from work. The participants described the importance of having an enclosed office, often well removed from the main living spaces of the home, in a deliberate effort to protect work from the rest of the home’s activities: ‘Well, the good is that it’s in the basement. We don’t use the basement’ (Carlina).

Another participant had begun teleworking from an upstairs workspace, but relocated that activity to a basement office. In the study interview, being conducted in person in her living room, she contrasted the two work areas, describing the basement workspace as ‘much better’, both from the perspective of avoiding household tasks and focusing on her work as a rehabilitation consultant:

> It feels better. I feel less compelled to do the dishes. If I’m up here I would find I would pace. I would have the headset on, I’d be talking and I’d be tidying. Is that such a bad thing? I don’t know if it was not affecting the quality of my conversation then I was doing it sort of absentmindedly and it gave me a little exercise pacing around a bit. That’s what I found. [Now that I’m downstairs] I don’t tend to come up as much. Getting motivated. I might take a longer lunch then sometimes. It’s just easy to start reading something and, oh that’s 45 minutes! (Rose)

All of the 18 teleworkers worked from enclosed offices and all but one of the basement offices had a solid, opaque door. In that exceptional case, the teleworker was not entirely satisfied with the work arrangement. She described critically her decision to install glass doors, despite the benefit of improved lighting:

> We put French doors on it because by building the office, we blocked off all the windows to one part of the basement. And I think, from an office perspective, that was probably a mistake because the kids do come to the basement. It’s our one unfinished place in the house and they can ride their bikes down there and play with their scooters and stuff. So they go there and play occasionally and they’re quite noisy and it bugs me a bit. And I can see them out the windows and it kind of bugs me, and it bugs them a little bit too, I think. (Violet)

In addition to decisions about physical office space, other strategies were used for curtailing or controlling intrusions of home, family and personal life into the workspace. Participants described a number of strategies, some of which involved pre-planning and purchased services, such as child care and housekeeping, while others were responsive strategies. Participants frequently invoked the discourse of boundaries in describing physical and metaphorical approaches to controlling intrusions. One teleworker volunteered the following advice to prospective homeworkers: ‘My advice would be, when they start, continue as though they were working in an office. In other words, get the boundaries set for family and friends’ (Angelica).

Work and household obligations represented competing life spheres for many of the study participants, particularly women with young pre-school and school-age children, but also for mothers of teen-age and older children. One teleworker
described how she trained her teenage daughter not to interrupt her work: “She would come in at any time, so I really had to say, “When I am in this office, don’t bother me.” I knew about what time she’d come home, and I’d just close my door and said, “Unless my door is open, you’re not to come in and talk to me”’ (Callista). Many of them described their difficulties extricating themselves from their family and household demands in order to be able to focus on their paid work. The gendered nature of work/home space for women required them to continually renegotiate and reinforce those boundaries with their family members and others.

While most of the strategies reported by participants involved ways to organize home work spaces and train family members and others to guard against intrusion of home into work, one participant described how she organized her workday to stay confined to her office to avoid potential distractions.

I usually start around 7:30 in the morning... and a typical day goes until about 6 o’clock [in the evening]. When I’m hungry I just grab something out of the fridge, or I make a big blender full of smoothie and just keep drinking it throughout the day. (Cicely)

These workers’ dedication to their work—both to their clients and their colleagues—comes through repeatedly in the interviews. Simply put, working from home allowed them to work more, longer, and without the distractions of a head office workspace. Like Cicely quoted above, sitting at her desk all day drawing sustenance from her smoothies, another teleworker worked extended shifts in her home office and had to use a timer to remind her to get up occasionally from her desk and move around to keep her blood flowing:

I need to take breaks, I’m the kind of person that is really focused so that I could sit here for four or five hours and not take a break ... I actually have a little timer that times for 30 minutes so that I ... get up and get stretch breaks ... I don’t always use it—when I don’t want to I don’t—[but] when I’m so desperate and stiff and sore then I do. (Iris)

The challenge of avoidance of household work during their workday is a theme mentioned repeatedly in the interviews. For these women housework was devalued relative to their employment and their families. Housework was not considered a priority, and generally did not distract the study participants. Angelica, a married mother with two young children, explained: ‘My focus, my priority is my family and if my house goes to shambles over it, I’m not concerned about it.’ Later in the interview, Angelica described how she had changed her mind about combining household chores with her work as a rehabilitation consultant:

Besides my work area ... I’ve got a washer which was convenient from the beginning because the washer is basically wall-to-wall with me ... So then in the beginning—you know you can do laundry at the same time—but I’ve stopped that because it makes too much noise and, I don’t know, it’s just not something I want to be doing during work time.

Angelica also described how dressing in business clothing helped her to maintain a division between work and non-work time: ‘People say, “Oh it would be great to spend the day working in your pajamas.” I never do that. Because I get dressed for work if I’m going to work, because that makes a distinction for me.’
Other participants described their need to educate partners and others about their inability to do household tasks while working. Lily, a mother of two young children, described her husband’s expectations about her availability to help with garden work:

Last year we planted a bunch of grass and the grass needed to be watered. [Her husband] would leave for work in the morning and for about two weeks he would say to me, ‘If you get a chance, can you water the grass today?’ And it wasn’t a matter of going out and turning on a sprinkler, it was a matter of turning on the sprinkler, then half an hour later, moving the sprinkler. And I did it on the days I wasn’t working, but on the days that I was working, I didn’t do it. And he’d come home and say, ‘You didn’t water the grass’, and I’d say, ‘Yeah. I was working today.’

She elaborated, describing her need to convince her husband and others that she really worked hard when working from home:

My husband has expectations of me that would never had been there had I not been at home... [Same with friends and neighbours] ‘Oh, you work at home.’ But... I straighten them out very quickly. ‘Yes, I do work at home and I bill 10 hours a day at home and I’m not sitting on the deck drinking margaritas!’ (Lily)

Although the participants largely focused on the need—while working—to resist pressures of house, home and family, they also indicated that working from home offered valued flexibility to attend, on occasion, to those demands. While the teleworkers’ needs for work–life separation featured prominently in the interviews, it was also clear that the boundaries between work and family were less rigidly enforced under particular circumstances, such as in the afternoon near the end of the workday; when a family member was not well, or to accomplish selected household tasks, such as starting dinner or doing a load of laundry.

Discussion

The occasion of the location or relocation of these women’s work environment into the home provides an opportunity to reflect on the ways they contest established gender identities. The women we interviewed actively negotiated their gendered identities, picking and choosing among the possibilities related to their waged work and their family work. They invested considerable energy and effort into those aspects of their work role that involved care and support for their claimants as well as for their colleagues. It appears that the gendered nature of their occupational role accounted for their willingness to incorporate aspects of the workplace into their homes.

We described how the women’s employer benefited from dispatching this group of workers from head office to their home offices; without the distractions and interruptions of a head office setting, these workers were better able to attend to the sometimes very needy claimants in their caseloads. For those teleworkers who were parents of young children, their paid work schedules were organized to accommodate their children’s needs. Those with older children or without children living at home were more at risk of working extended hours. Some reported feelings of pressure towards overwork, necessitating strategies to contain work within scheduled times and bounded spaces.
Of less importance to the women studied were the demands of housekeeping; working at home is not viewed as a way to accomplish household chores. Some reported trying initially to intersperse household chores with their work as rehabilitation consultants; few found such arrangements workable—their jobs were simply too demanding, requiring their full attention and concentration. While they worked at home, these teleworkers posted a figurative ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign for their family members, friends and neighbours.

In conclusion, this qualitative case study analysis has shown how home-based work causes leakage of public activities into what were traditionally private and sometimes intimate household spaces. Home-based telework blurs the boundaries between home and work. For these workers the home office began to assume some workplace characteristics, namely, the employer’s control over the premises. Home-based workers were generally concerned with separation of their workplace and their home. One participant, a longstanding employee and a married mother of two young children, recalled her reaction to management’s initial decision to send her home:

I’m a very single-minded person. When I’m doing one thing, I have to do one thing. And when they first told us they were moving us into home offices, I was really horrified by the idea of the two things I do—my home life and my work life—being entwined. (Lily)

This article has described the variety of strategies used by the teleworkers to curtail or control the intrusions of their workplace into their home lives, and to insulate their work from interference from household and family. Mr. Dithers, in the form of work of the case study company, entered these women’s homes—sometimes by invitation, sometimes uninvited—staking claim to some of the territory in their homes. We have examined the employees’ reactions, considered how relocating the workplace into their homes changed their work and the rest of their lives. The home-based work arrangement reinforced these women’s gendered roles of caring. The work of a rehabilitation consultant is a gendered occupation. Basic characteristics of this stereotypically female occupation, in particular its caring and supportive case management function, were seen to contribute to the workers’ expressed satisfaction with the relocation of their work from their employer’s premises to their own homes.

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Notes

1. Mussen and Tietze (2004), in a UK study of professionals who teleworked from home, described how these workers reshaped and renegotiated temporal and spatial boundaries between (paid) work and the rest of their lives.
2. Based on their qualitative study of Swedish teleworkers’ home workspaces, Wikström et al. (1998, p. 203) contrast the ‘place in the sun’ arrangements in which workers—typically females—
opportunistically seek out available areas of peace and tranquility within the home, with the physically separate ‘splendid isolation’ workspaces typically used by male teleworkers.

3. The name of the case study company is a pseudonym.

4. A word should be said about the ‘real world’ nature of this research. Change is a constant in a case study project such as this. Changes occurred both in corporate policy regarding alternative work arrangements and in individual workers’ life and family situations. Over the course of the study, individual participants altered their work schedules, hours of work and work locations, the relative proportions of work done from home and head office, and even their job descriptions. For this reason, while most of their observations were based on current work experience, some were reflections on their past employment experiences. During the course of data collection the researchers were occasionally frustrated by the challenge of studying such a ‘moving target’. Upon reflection, we have become aware that the data set is enriched by the addition of the insight and perspective of participants who can compare and contrast their various work arrangements as these change over time.

5. All names of participants are pseudonyms.

References


Mirchandani, Kiran (2000) The best of both worlds’ and ‘cutting my own throat’: contradictory images of home-based work, Qualitative Sociology, 23(2), pp. 159–182.
Sra. Dithers viene a cenar: El teletrabajo y la fusión de trabajo de mujeres y el domino privado en Canadá

Resumen Los estudios del teletrabajo desde casa han rendido resultados confusos de la utilidad del teletrabajo en facilitar la balanza de vida-trabajo. La mayoría de investigaciones sobre los impactos sociales de teletrabajo desde casa enfocan en los trabajadores – empleados o autoempleados – quienes eligen trabajar en este arreglo de trabajo alternativo. Los analistas del mercado laboral, sin embargo, pronostican una alza en el teletrabajo iniciado por los empleadores. Este artículo, como un estudio de caso de la plantilla de una de las firmas más grandes en el sector financiero canadiense, considera las condiciones del trabajo de teletrabajadoras involuntarias, aquellos obligados por sus empleadores a trabajar a tiempo completo desde una oficina en casa. Se realizaron 18 entrevistas profundas con teletrabajadoras que tienen ocupaciones profesionales.
en la firma del estudio de caso. Las participantes describieron las ventajas y desventajas del teletrabajo, en particular en cuanto a los aspectos espaciales y sociales del trabajar en casa. Se entiende que el carácter generizado de sus oficios y los cargos de cuidado y apoyo que tienen las mujeres en sus responsabilidades familiares y en el trabajo facilitan la reubicación de sus trabajos de la oficina hacia la casa. En muchas jurisdicciones, el teletrabajo se promueve como una manera de proveer más flexibilidad a las mujeres para que puedan lograr un equilibrio entre sus vidas de trabajo y sus responsabilidades familiares. Éste artículo subraya algunas de las contradicciones que existen en la reubicación del lugar de trabajo hacia las casas de las mujeres.

PALABRAS CLAVES: trabajo de casa; teletrabajo; mujeres; estudios de casos del lugar de trabajo; balanza vida-trabajo; fronteras espaciales.