

Time-Space Flexibility and Work: Analyzing the “Anywhere and Anytime Office” in the Entertainment, New Media, and Arts Sector

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Abstract

The applied cultural analysis work presented in this article was conducted with independent professionals who work in a flexible time-space format – known as telework – for the entertainment, new media, and arts sector in the Los Angeles area. Most participants are associates of the production and post-production boutique “Studio Can” as well as the curatorial new media and arts nonprofit organization “PalMarte.” When working in a flexible time-space format, boundaries between leisure/family life and work at home, or personal and public realms, tend to become blurred. This blurred context involves a web of cultural complexity that exists behind the materialization of boundaries. Through empirical material, this article examines rhythms and mechanisms between flexibility and stability, unveiling a viscous consistency of everyday life. This work helps to better understand the relation between leisure/family life and work at home, as well as stability and change, to rethink these realms and how they relate to each other but also how they transform one another. Although culturally different, these realms are bridged through the material culture that surrounds them. As conveyors, objects (such as a heating pad) and activities culturally transport participants between realms. Research methods combined time-diaries, interviews, observation, visual ethnography, and autoethnography. While applying academic knowledge into a non-academic setting to rethink realms and how they relate and transform each other in a bridged relationship, this work is also an invitation to rethink the relationship between the realms of academia and non-academia.

Keywords: Applied cultural analysis, flexibility, telework, boundaries, routines, home, work, leisure, entertainment, new media and arts.

Introduction

The aim with this article is to uncover layers of cultural processes that help enact boundaries and structure the lives of independent professionals working from home for the entertainment, new media and arts sector. Fieldwork was conducted with five professionals whose ages range from early 30s to mid 60s. These professionals work in a flexible time-space structure primarily from their homes in the Los Angeles area. These participants have chosen to develop their creative careers from home or a flexible studio space in proximity to leisure/family as a philosophy of life. For them, personal and professional lives are integrated and define one another.

Most participants are associates of the production and post-production boutique “Studio Can” as well as the curatorial new media and arts nonprofit organization “PalMarte,” both fictitious names to anonymize their identities. Studio Can is a production and post-production boutique that creates special features for DVD and Blu-ray (optical disc for high definition video), Movie Trailers, and TV Spots, as well as original video and new media content for the web. PalMarte is a nonprofit organization that promotes networking among filmmakers, artists, and business through information, dialogue forums, global Q&A’s, and consulting on how to build creative communities around the arts. While Studio Can has a small studio space, it works primarily with a number of freelance professionals who primarily carry out their work through satellite home offices. PalMarte has no formal ‘office’ space, and members work from their own homes in different states within the US and in other countries.

The two organizations in this study raised the need of having a person in an ‘outside’ role to provide them with a more global perspective on how they work. They want to be able to move forward in a more informed manner. However, as pointed out by one of the participants, Bettina, “you can’t always see the forest through the trees when you’re building your business or organization. We do a lot of reacting to events”. In other words, gaining perspective sometimes requires a wider perspective. ‘Seeing the forest’ – or developing the organizations’ perspective of their work – was my job as a cultural analyst in this research. By taking the time to look into everyday practices, questions such as what participants value in their work, what they miss, and how they do their work are key factors in this research.

Research methods used in this article combined time-diaries (a daily activities log) interviews, observation, visual ethnography, and autoethnography. Autoethnography is understood here as “research, writing and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social” (Qtd. in Denzin 2006: 419). Since I, myself, am a co-founder and member of the nonprofit organization PalMarte, I bring this experience to the research analysis. Nevertheless, my personal, social and cultural experience related to the research

topic in this case goes beyond my participation at PalMarte. The fact that I now live in the country where the boundary limitations of this research are placed, but grew up in a different country, adds another set of references to this analysis. I, myself, experience aspects of boundary and placement that are part of the scope of this research.

One specificity of this sector is the requirements for inspired artistic and creative elements, which are not predictable. If flexibility may benefit these participants' creative process through a more autonomous and integrated organization of time and space, it may challenge team creativity, work and leisure boundaries, as well as stability. Therefore, although the findings of this research may help rethink telework practices in other sectors, they pertain specifically to the entertainment, new media, and arts sector, and are not meant to be general for other types of work being accomplished at home.

Some of the chosen concepts in this article are: work/leisure, home/office, private/public, and the individual/collective or family. Through practice, these concepts have historically revealed cultural values and changes in society because they involve defining cultural realms of life. In this context, the present study is relevant to illuminating less dichotomic relationships between these cultural realms in a time when dichotomy is being challenged by the integration of digital technology in our everyday lives, regardless of where and when one is located. Going beyond the traditional dichotomy of the concepts of home, leisure, and work, these concepts are amplified and can reveal other facets in a more complex interaction.

Where Am I? Work Place and Private Space

I step into the spacious house through its front door and suddenly a tall dog runs, barking from inside, and begins sniffing my feet and legs. I am welcomed by the participants I will interview while I am still accompanied by the dog named Porter. The owner of the house is Jason, whose work consists mainly of the editing of feature films, which can take between six to eight months and involves other editors and editor assistants who also work from their homes. Sometimes, depending on the phase of a project, these editors go to Jason's house to work together. On the day of my visit, two other editors are working in the house, one of them, Brendan, also interviewed for this research.

They point to where the main editing suite they work at is located, a separate room with a door, but we go to the kitchen pantry and sit around the dining table. The flowery design of a Portmeirion pottery set of china in the rustic cupboard that I can see right across from where I am sitting adds coziness to the atmosphere and invites me to imagine breakfast with family happening in this same space. On the four walls of the room, pictures of Jason's family printed in different sizes situate me at a home where family, coziness and work coexist.

Home Sweet (and Busy) Home

Later that day, at my home, comfortably wearing sweatpants and a used shirt from a film festival I once produced as part of my work, I am sitting on the couch with my laptop to type notes from fieldwork and transcribe the interviews. While I play that day's recorded interviews, the soundscape of Jason's home is amplified in my ears. Mixing the sound of utensils in the kitchen with barking, the light creaking of doors and popping wood from the floors and furniture, I think about the cozy and safe feeling of being home that I was experiencing. But, I also find myself questioning how much of this coziness and safety is reality, and how much is in fact imagined.

Moving from sounds to images, on my laptop I open a digital folder with photos from the research, where I find an 1800's painting. The Swedish artist Carl Larsson (1894), in one of the watercolors of his own home, depicts a secluded and peaceful nook which he calls *Cozy Corner*, a place where he "experienced that unspeakably sweet feeling of seclusion from the noise of the world" (Curator section, para. 1):



Figure 1. *Cozy Corner* – Watercolor on paper (32 x 43 cm)

Looking at Larsson's artwork I see his dog and inevitably remember Porter, Jason's dog. I select the folder with pictures that participants took in their routines and find one of Porter. In a similarly cozy environment as depicted in Larsson's painting, I also see a dog who, instead of placidly sleeping on the floor, sits on the same chair as his owners and leaves dirty spots on the cushions. This participant's

home also seems busier than the cozy corner depicted by Larsson's painting. Here, the marks on the fireplace signal that it has been used, as not all of the candles are straight, art decorations are mixed with a cinema competition trophy, and a clock reminds us of the time dimension that runs on the other side of the room, where a laptop is used to do some work on the dining table. Instead of being secluded from the noise of the world, this home is filled not only with the sound of family and pets but also with work.

The producer of the film on which Jason and Brendan are finalizing the edit arrives. Barking, Porter runs to the door and comes back following this newcomer as he did with me. The kitchen pantry fills up. Now we have a team of filmmakers, a researcher, participants of the research, a family, and pets, all these roles in one space. Jason says to the producer: "Come in! We're here being interviewed from Sweden."

I am introduced to the producer, who asks if I am Swedish. I explain that I am finishing my master's degree at a Swedish University and that I lived there, but that I do not come from Sweden. I tell him that I come from Brazil. He then speaks a little Portuguese, tells me where he had visited in the country, and next asks me where I live in Brazil. I answer that I actually moved from Brazil and live now in Redondo Beach, around a 35 minute drive from where we are, at Jason's home in the Los Angeles area.

For an instant, motivated by the producer's questions, I think about the complexity involved in these answers and the feeling of having more than one home that coexists but as Mallet notes, hold "differing symbolic meaning and salience" (Mallet 2004: 79). Where does home begin and end when one moves to another country or when one works from home? Boundaries here are not clearly defined. Home, to me, means occupying a space where I have some sense of ownership, familiarity and understanding. In my home equation, I include references of my childhood, different places where my close family members live, as well as places where I have lived and live currently without those family members. They are all my homes, and although they bring different architectures, temperatures, textures, and people, they coexist and communicate with each other. These different homes ultimately help form my understanding of how I occupy spaces, concentrating the notion of home into my own body and existence in the world.

While I briefly stroll through my memories of my homes, Francis, Jason's cat, apparently bothered by so much conversation in the kitchen pantry, gets up from his chair, steps on the dining room table, crosses between all of us and jumps to the floor, leaving the room. Over the same table, the producer hands out envelopes with the team's paychecks. Around the dining table they talk for a while about details related to work.

Home and Away: Creating Other Combinations

Seeing this variable use of furniture, space, and time, I begin wondering when and how home and work became separated or put together. Historically, moving from the craftsman model where work and leisure/family life blended in the same space – home – Western societies separated these realms into different spheres of time and space materialized in the split of weekdays vs. weekends and office vs. house (Nippert-Eng 1996). Such a dichotomic cultural separation of the meaning of home, work, and leisure is challenged in the case of telework, revealing other combinations.

While interviewing Mary, a motion graphic artist who does graphics and animation for ads, TV, and feature films from her apartment, she tells me that she sometimes works on the weekend but might not work on a Wednesday to travel instead. Mary used to work for a film company in Hollywood, but quit to work full-time from home because she wanted more autonomy, as she defined it:

I like working independently because if I decide I want to take a vacation, I can plan and say no to work, and say that I'll not be around. I like that opposed to when you're working for someone where you have this kind of set amount of days and you can't go beyond that (Mary).

The dichotomic division of work place and private space creates a more compartmentalized relationship with time, objects, and routines that are understood as belonging to separated realms. For example, the preparation for leaving home to go to work at an office involves specific routines and a different use of objects from a more integrated work/private space approach. For a worker who follows a Monday through Friday and '9 to 5' routine of work at an office, a piece of clothing, such as his or her pajamas, cannot belong to both work and private realms, since wearing pajamas at an office is not usually accepted. But when working from home, this same piece of clothing can fit into both realms.

Another aspect involving one's routine in a dichotomic division of work place and private space is the commute to and from work. That moment in the enclosed space of a vehicle creates a transition between home and work both in space and time. Having to *go* to an office, on top of wearing something other than pajamas, one minimally needs to carry a wallet with money, a bus or train pass or the car keys, and plan his or her schedule according to the rush hour. As a consequence of the division of work place and private space, objects and routines become the dividers that materialize separation between a more personal realm and an external realm of work in this case.

During fieldwork, home was felt neither as sanctuary and refuge nor work usurpation as described by Penny Gurstein (2001) in her book about telework in daily life. Being at home was felt here as an experience that contains both the outside world and the warming ambiance, which helps fill the desire of "proofs or illusions of stability" (Bachelard 1994: 16), although not perfectly organized as in a framed watercolor.

Symbolically, a t-shirt that is related to my work, which I wear while working in the warm environment of my home or a table that is also used to have breakfast with family, characterizes ‘being home’ as an act of “inhabiting a second skin” (Ahmed 1999: 341). Sara Ahmed, who was born in England, grew up in Australia, and whose family lives in Pakistan, argues that this second skin contains the homely subject and at the same time “allows the subject to be touched and touch the world that is neither simply in the home or away from the home” (Ahmed 1999: 341). This relationship between home and away brings the warm feelings linked to home closer to the uncertainties and constraints of the world that are also part of this home enactment.

As described by Gary, another participant who has a three-year-old son, home is for him “the nurturing feeling of hearing the steps of my son running in the house and the rustle of the trees brushing up against the window.” However, reflecting “both reality and ideal” (Qtd. in Moore 2000: 209), together with the rustle of the trees, Gary’s home is also filled with some practical concerns. Such concerns include a carefully planned time logistic to take care of his son, paying the rent, getting more work, and even fighting with the owner of the house next door who, looking for a better view of the ocean, cut down the tree that used to give shade to Gary’s house and creates a familiar feeling of home to him. Home in this case means personal nourishment, but at the same time it means demands from an uncertain world.

Boundary Permeability: Shaping Categories

If boundaries between leisure/family life at home and work at home are not precisely defined, how do professionals working from home delineate and organize these realms in a time-space flexible schedule? Searching for objects and activities that participants enact boundaries with, I turned my attention to some “goods-to-think-with” (Turkle 2007: 4) or artifacts that could materialize participant’s boundaries and how they swing from one realm to another.

Folding and Unfolding Versatile Boundaries

While interviewing Mary in her apartment, the door between her work room and the living room called my attention. From her couch (which is also her bed), I noticed that the door of Mary’s bedroom (which is also her office) was actually a two sided panel that revolves on its center, creating two passage ways as it opens, giving the illusion of more space. The feeling was as if spaces had multiple uses here and were easily made into different places in a kind of a folding and unfolding wall process as seen in Gary Chang’s architecture project *Domestic Transformer* (Planetgreen.com 2010, January 7)¹. In this versatile composition, a space of approximately 30 m² changes into 24 different rooms through sliding

panels and walls. Similarly to the *Domestic Transformer*, boundaries are transformed here as if they worked in a reversible partition system, expanding to become one realm, contracting to become another realm or mixing both realms at the same time. To help fold and unfold these boundary partitions, objects play a fundamental role of conveyors, culturally transporting participants to bridge these realms and produce continuity.

This process of transforming spaces takes me to my own desk, where I also fold and unfold boundaries between the kind of work I do in the same area. On one morning I might unfold my laptop and work at my desk at 6 AM, doing an interview for PalMarte on Skype with an artist who is located in a different time zone than me. Then I might fold my laptop, push it to the back of my desk and spread out the books I need to read or assignments I need to evaluate for classes I teach. Meanwhile, I might unfold another window with my e-mails and answer a message my family sent to me, which not only rearranges the screen space I am enacting but also unfolds another dimension of my life, combining both personal and professional in the same space. Folding and unfolding windows and moving objects on my desk are in a way also a transforming process that helps creates boundaries through materiality.

The multiuse of a desk and the transitions of laptop windows opening and closing may work here as a type of commute. For a worker who must commute to an office, the time spent in an enclosed space divides personal space and work. When working from home, the transitioning between realms and its necessary objects gives place to integration, which is materialized through the opening and closing of a laptop or simply a walk to the kitchen to pour some coffee and go to another part of the house with a mug in hand. Here one does not travel physically, but makes a transition, not quite to a different realm (as in the physical commute), but instead to an integration of realms.

Developing Strategies to Keep Focused

Still focusing on what objects actually *do* and what participants *do* with objects (Frykman & Gilje 2009), I turned my attention to how participants take their breaks during a workday. These pauses range from reading the news or doing something online, making some calls, doing other types of work, spending time with family, cooking, going to the grocery store or to the gym, and taking the dog for a walk or taking a nap. However, boundary transition between actual breaks and diversion from work can be easily trespassed in one direction, but it is harder to transition in the other direction depending on the phase of work in which creative teleworkers are currently engaged.

For example, in the beginning of a creative project, when participants are still not sure of how to write a screenplay and edit or animate a story, and when they have the selections of interviews, images, and drawings scattered in their minds, it is easy to transcend the boundary from work to leisure/family or personal life at

home. However, it is harder to transcend the boundary in the other direction when going back to work. As described by another participant: “At that stage of the process, I feel overloaded trying to organize so much, in a short amount of time. It’s a challenge to keep focused and not go do something else.” Feeling overloaded in this phase of work creates the desire of wanting to escape from the challenge of organizing by going “home,” or a state of mind that represents home as leisure/family life. Home in this case works as a category that goes beyond a physical location, meaning a reference of stability when facing uncertainty and a place where there is already a structure and where we do not have to deal with the unknown.

Switching to practice, boundary work in this case involves personal strategies that participants create in order to keep focused when they take a break from work. They know that permeability makes it easy to cross the boundary in one direction, to procrastination for example, but makes it hard to go back. As another participant, Bettina, a director-producer and editor, pointed out, it is a question of playing games with oneself:

You need to have a break. You can’t be consciously creating all the time. If you need to push things off for a day or two, maybe you’re not ready to begin that project mentally. But when that one or two day break becomes four or five days because you are avoiding the work, then there’s something wrong [she laughs]. That’s when I begin playing games with myself. I keep a heating pad under my feet under the desk and it feels so nice to have the heat under my feet... Then it keeps me sitting there and working. (Bettina)



Figure 2. Heating pad used under feet

For Bettina, who works as a producer-director and editor of entertainment advertising, playing games with herself works as a strategy to build boundaries

and create stability. Here, her body and senses are accessing the material world surrounding her, while the heating pad is not only emitting heat but also evoking a feeling of comfort and safety that helps her to face the challenge of the unknown.

Other participants described similar strategies such as having something to munch on to keep them working. Trail mix, peanuts, and chocolates are some of the “munchies” mentioned by them. Having a bowl with something to munch on was defined “like cigarettes for people who smoke, not simply because of the nicotine but because you are doing something else, which keeps you engaged,” said one of the participants.

In one of the interviews conducted together, Bettina and Gary called attention to the difficulty for some people to manage their own time and becoming self-motivated to finish a project without anyone telling them when to work and when not to work.

People we haven't called back or that we had trouble with it's primarily due to time management and passion. They might have passion but they might not know how to manage their time or vice versa. Passion and time management is really where you are at when working on your own (Gary).

Following this thought, Gary emphasizes that the philosophy in his organization is about working in a partnership, communicating in an open minded way, and asking for ideas. “I think (the) partnership will last longer than employees or contractor workers,” he said. Both participants showed concerns about the difficulty of finding partners as opposed to what they called “the employees' mentality.” They conclude that it comes down to commitment and passion.

Leisure/Family and Work at Home: Threads that are Woven Together

In addition to using a heating pad, another way participants create warm temperatures that help to materialize boundaries is through the use of pictures of loved ones in their work space. In a way, these pictures connect participants' workplace to their life outside of work.

When asked how he differentiates leisure/family and work at home, Gary says: “All of the same philosophies of work are translated into my family and my family philosophies are translated into my work.” He explains that rather than being separated, he strives to integrate these two realms even further. When I interviewed Gary, he had just returned from a project that he had to work on while abroad for three weeks. He explained to me how painful it was for him to be far away from his wife and son while working abroad. For him, not being able to blend time working and time spent with his family made work feel less like his desired definition of work, i.e. as highly integrated with home.

Looking for participants' definition of work, Brendan tells me that for him his work is a creative calling and therefore it is not an intrusion if he is talking about it on a Sunday or Saturday, for example. He complements his thought saying: “If I

didn't like my work as much, that would not be okay and I would have to find a more defined separation" (Brendan).

Satisfaction and autonomy play an important role for these professionals by defining free time not as a dichotomic separation from work as if one wants to be far from it with the kind of "Thank God is Friday!" relief or a Monday moan.

As Bettina described it, while holding the colorful embroidered throw that decorates the couch at Studio Can, rather than being separated, leisure/family life and work are like the threads that are woven together to make a throw or a blanket for her. Although it has different colors, the threads can only form the whole because they are integrated. If one of the colorful threads is missing, it will affect the other. To weave these threads together and integrate these realms, objects and activities play a fundamental role of conveyors, culturally transporting participants to bridge these realms and produce continuity. Fieldwork showed that flexible work involves more materiality than we tend to think. Contrary to the idea of a hovering virtuality, these teleworkers are placed in and through cultural materiality that not only creates boundaries, but also routines. How these routines may help create stability within flexibility is a subject further explored in the next part of this article.

What Flexible Routines Look Like

Since I was busy because the deadline for the project was coming up fast, I couldn't read the New York Times in the morning as I like to do. I jumped out of bed, took a shower to wake me up, grabbed a banana in the kitchen and went to the computer to work. I kept the shades closed... the darkness helps me remain immersed in the images and sounds I'm working with. I kept my cell phone on but only answered calls that were urgent. For lunch I went to the corner and grabbed a turkey sandwich at Subway. That nourishes me but also takes me away from work for a while. When getting my sandwich I get fresh air, I talk to other people and then when I come back I have more energy to work. For dinner I cooked a great pasta dish. I love pasta and cooking also helps me step out of work to then go back (Bettina).

The passage above came from my interview with Bettina after she showed me her time-diary and when we talked about routines in the entertainment, new media, and arts sector being based on the projects' deadlines.

However, certain patterns or routinized rituals are the same, although participants' schedules change. For Bettina, reading the news is like exercising and running on the beach for another participant, or drinking a mandatory glass of wine after work for another one. These are components that "create continuity and exert some control over time" (Ehn & Löfgren 2010: 121) and no matter how busy participants are, they strive to keep it in their routines, even if the time that they do it varies.

Structuring a Routine

When deadlines are not as tight, most participants try to create a structured routine to organize their days. “I don’t like having no routine,” says Mary, the motion graphic designer and animator. Mary tries to follow a routine where she sets her alarm for 7:30 AM, checks her e-mails, has breakfast and opens up her *to do* list to move on in her work day.

Jason, who works as an editor from his home, used to alternate taking his kids to school in the morning and picking them up in the afternoon. Today Jason’s kids are adults, and whenever possible Jason tries to follow a set schedule. Sometimes he works alone and at other times, depending on the phase of a project, he needs to work together with other associates at his home. He tries to begin working at 10 AM and takes a break by making some coffee. He stops working for lunch at home or sometimes he goes to a restaurant between 1 and 2 PM, and then goes back to work until 6 PM. Jason emphasizes the importance of stopping for lunch as an essential moment of pause that he values. Amid demands from work, family, and social life, developing some sort of schedule helps these professionals to create a sense of “social time” (Qtd. in Shove 2009: 30), a time that is lived based on social practices.

Keeping a Porous Routine

However, although structuring their schedules participants’ routines are more porous than the traditional ‘9 to 5’ schedule of an office. They might start working at 9 or 10 AM, but may work until midnight or 2 AM because they broke up the day to go out, take a walk or a nap, or take care of necessary domestic matters. For example, having dinner at a culturally acceptable time with their family may integrate their unorthodox routine with society’s schedule but it may also necessitate having to work later into the evening. Porosity in this case comes from the possibility of having some ‘breathing room’ during work time. When working from home, participants sometimes describe situations in which they step away from work a few times in an hour to take two consecutive walks around the block or to smoke. But stepping away from their work helped them unlock creative solutions for their work. Porosity here is characterized by an integration between work and other activities.

Participants’ routines are also susceptible to changes. With a young child (called Eugene), Gary frequently has to rearrange his routine together with his wife Angie in order to cope with demands from family life and work, as Gary explains:

My wife works three days a week. It's not odd to text her at work saying: Angie, can you come home as soon as you leave work? Don't stop at the supermarket because I have a meeting at 5 today. Or: Angie, I can't take Eugene tomorrow morning, I need to be in Hollywood at 9. Can you drop him off before you go to work? Or the

opposite: Angie, don't worry, take your time coming home. I got Eugene and there's nothing going on at the studio, I will take care of dinner.

Gary tells me that he enjoys the flexibility to accommodate his family and work in a more balanced way than working for an agency, where he was away from home or his own studio in the past. He described working for an agency as a more compartmentalized life.

Flexible Routine vs. Office Routine

Although valuing this porous routine as opposed to his work at the ad agency when he had to follow the agency's schedule, Gary pointed out the lack of synergy as a disadvantage of working from home or anywhere alone. For him, working in the same space together with other creators can be potentially synergetic and challenges him to generate new ideas. "This synergy is something that I miss terribly," he tells me.

But when I asked him about the distractions in the work done with others at an agency or office, he pointed out the difference between distractions related to work and distractions related to family matters:

But [in the agency] your distractions are your work. They are work oriented. If I'm working on an edit and I can't figure out how to get from point A to point B, then I walk over and discuss a creative solution for that. Then all of a sudden the graphic artist down the hall walks by and says: *Hey, you know what? I just saw that piece and had a great idea for a graphic treatment for that...* Wow! Now I have an idea. What if I change this to match that? It becomes a group effort of creating a project. So, the distraction here is work oriented. At home it is: *Honey, can you run down to the store for me and grab sugar?* It's not work oriented. At work you can go back to your bay and be back to work.

Trying to build this synergy, Gary is expanding Studio Can's space to accommodate more professionals working together at once. However, with the expansion comes the concern if growth – business wise – will sacrifice the perceived benefits of flexible work. Business growth in this case is perceived as something positive (to bring synergy), but at the same time it may represent an increase in managerial responsibility that is too similar to an office structure.

Although other participants also miss having synergy at times, the time spent in the commute and non-work related activities with people who are not family or not exactly friends when working at an external location were perceived to be more wasteful than beneficial. Mary tells me that

when working at somebody else's place you can waste time because once 6 o'clock rolls around, you kind of say: *Oh! This is the time I'm supposed to go home or maybe work an extra hour.* But you can blame management, whereas here, since I manage things, I'm responsible for everything.

When working at an office setting, participants feel it is not possible to follow their own rhythm and that they are expected to be working a straight duration of time. Yet at home or another location that they choose as their working space,

they can step away from their work as much as they want and do other unrelated things, or even other kinds of work to help ‘unlock the solutions’ for their main work at hand. Moreover, by working in a time-space flexible format participants feel they can create their own space and make themselves more comfortable, which was considered an extremely important component for creativity.

It is important to highlight that participants who have a spouse or kids expressed the need for a dedicated space exclusively for work – with a door – in order to feel more secluded when needed. This is a kind of space that Gary, for example, does not have at home and that he instead developed at Studio Can, located near his home. Although participants enjoy the comfort and freedom of being at home and blending work and personal life, there are circumstances that require a type of office moment to manage interference and find their balance.

Water or Honey? Defining the Consistency of Flexibility

Despite valuing this time-space flexibility, participants need to deal with the challenges of making decisions in order to structure their lives. The consistency of participants’ routines is not exactly solid, as if they were working at an office with a time and a space previously defined for work. When working from home, the consistency of their routines becomes more fluid. This fluidity, however, is not totally ‘liquid,’ as in an overflowing and chaotic lack of structure. Participants’ fluid routines bring a structure that adds some thickness, or what Tom O’dell calls “cultural viscosity” (personal communication, January 25, 2011), to its consistency.

In the study of fluids, “viscosity is a measure of the resistance against flowing when a force is applied” (Boyne 2010: 91). In measuring viscosity, it is possible to determine how resistant a fluid is or how much friction is present in a liquid. For instance, by filling up a container with water (liquid) and another container with honey (viscous), we can visualize resistance when we throw a similar object in each of the containers. As a result of the object’s impact, water will immediately spill all over uncontrollably, without showing much resistance. On the other hand, honey will cede much slower and not spill all over due to the force of resistance to fluidity that was applied.

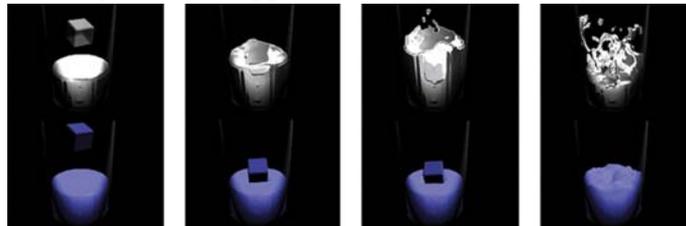


Figure 3. Viscosity demonstration – top container with water (more liquid) vs. bottom container with honey (more viscous)

(Wikimedia Commons, 2008, October 15)

To avoid trundling off uncontrollably, individuals create routines that work as friction, adhering their lives to a surface of activities and objects. During the fieldwork conducted for this research, participants structured their lives through cultural processes of routinization while coping with changes and negotiating priorities. Here, reading the news, running on the beach, consciously making sure to stop working for lunch, or pausing to drink a glass of wine may seem trivial, but these are essential elements to keep participants' lives structured.

Integrating and Stretching a Viscous Routine

At Studio Can, while interviewing Gary about his time-diary, he told me: "I don't have the mentality of '9 to 5.' I go to work and then I'm off... then I go back to work and then I'm off..." Gary defines his work and personal life as an interactive duo where each is in synch with one another, therefore he is constantly bridging these two worlds. Since he does not have a dedicated workplace that is off limits from his spouse or kids' interference at his house, as Jason does, Gary alternates locations by working both at Studio Can and at home, which are only one mile apart.

Taking a closer look at part of Gary's time-diary may help analyze how this synching relationship works in his routine. When Gary filled out his diary, both his wife and youngest son were at home on holiday vacations. Therefore, he did not have to worry about working from home on the days his wife would be at work as he normally does in order to take care of their child.

Time / When?	What I do?	Do I do anything else?	Where?	With Whom?	ICT Tools?	Comments
9:30 am	Edit "The Tribe" [product 1's name]		Studio	Solo workflow	Computer and hard drives	
11:00 am	"The Stories" [product 2's name] Direction		Studio / Martin [Associate] Design Los Angeles	Worked with Martin via phone call		Contacted Valentina [Associate] in MASS about "The Stories"
12:00 pm	Back to edit + Lunch		Studio	Solo		
3:30 pm	Break for Gym / Home to see family		Gym / Home		Text with Angie [participants' wife]	
6:00 pm	Edit "The Tribe"		Studio			
7:15 pm	Pick up business book at Barnes and Noble					
8:30 pm	Time with family		Home	Family	Turned off ICT tools	
10:30 pm – 1:00 am	Working on [client's name] Channel project		Home		Email & web on laptop	

Table 1. Time-diary

The diary sequence shows a day marked by alternating activities from one project to another, and from work to non-related work activities. Specifically from 3:30 to 6 P.M., in an interval of 2.5 hours, Gary transitioned from work, to gym, to home and back to work again. When explaining this transition to me, he emphasized: “I need to be outside. Gym, home and come back to work. Eating or showering goes in these hours.” In this transition between places and activities, Gary has to lock the door of the studio, set the alarm, open the door of his car, drive for five minutes or so, get out of the car, lock the car, change clothes to work out at the gym, take a shower, change clothes again, and head back to the studio or home.

These transitions involve an integral articulation between his body, the material surrounding, and events that together produce habits or “an incorporated capacity that is encountering different situations” (Frykman 2009: 2). These habits orient Gary to make sense of his everyday life and blend leisure/family time and work no matter how his schedule changes or even where he is. Gary explained to me that he had recently spent a week working in a project in another state in the US, where the environment was very different from the beach environment he is used to in Southern California. Nevertheless, he created a running route in the area where he was staying so that he could follow his exercise routine. It is as if doing so, he could maintain exercises as a stable activity and ritual to deal with the ever-changing nature of his work.

Following Gary’s time-diary, at the end of the day he transitioned back and forth again to working from home, a place where he was earlier enjoying his family. In his routine, playing with his son, putting him to bed and closing the door of the child’s bedroom was described as an important moment of his day. For Gary, enjoying routinized moments with his son, such as putting him in bed or playing with him on their living room rug in the middle of the afternoon, is something he values in comparison to the time when he worked fulltime at an agency and had to commute every day. Unable to alternate work and time off, that was a period of time where Gary said that he missed participating in his oldest daughter’s childhood and that now, with his youngest son, has been different.

Developing Habits

On a rare rainy morning in the Los Angeles area, I could hear the enchanting sound of the friction between car tires and the wet asphalt that was coming from the road through Studio Can’s open door. At a certain point Gary and Bettina told me where their main conference room was located: in a car’s enclosed space. “When we’re in traffic on the 405 [freeway], that’s the place for our thinking and talking, when we discuss projects,” they said. When asked why they chose that space, the need to being outside was emphasized, but not simply an “outside” as if one is going to the beach a few blocks away. Instead, the soothing journey of going somewhere and the compartmentalized space of a car were highlighted:

The long period of time becomes a time when we're able to adjust what we need to do for today but also what we need to do for next year. Maybe that's a very American thing because cruising in a car, just going for a ride, unlocks the potential in our minds. It's very stimulating and you're not looking at each other. We're looking forward, it's a safe zone. And what happens in the compartment of that car stays in that car. If she's upset with something I said [about the business], the minute we get out of the car, it stays there and we go to work on set and maybe we revisit the idea on our way home, or maybe not. (Gary)

Thinking of that feeling of being on the move in a compartmentalized space, like a home is, I am now taken to the road, imagining participants' conference rooms in a car on the 405 freeway. When Gary tells me about driving as being a way to unlock the potential of people's minds, I think of the amount of driving I encounter in the US in comparison to my lifestyle in Brazil. Then I start to ask myself what kinds of habits and routines are involved in the act of driving that could help unlock the potential of Americans' minds.

Returning to Gary's and Bettina's 'conference room,' driving allowed them to relax and let their minds work on ideas, as if they had turned on the automatic pilot, and was possibly facilitated by the culture they grew up in where driving is a routine that people become generally familiar with early in their lives. This automatic pilot, each step in driving my car for example, works as a kind of naturalization where what was once a conscious practice (*praxis*) moves into the *habitus* or an unconscious act through repetition (Wilk 2009). Habits and routines in this case liberate us from the stress of dealing with what is new.

Trying to understand how habits and routines work, as well as how they may free us to changes, I turned to my own experience again. With my portable digital recorder, I captured the sounds of daily habits I had. The result is a sequence that starts with my cell phone alarm beeping, hitting snooze, running cold water that I wash my face and brush my teeth with, followed by a succession of opening and closing of specific cabinets and drawers in the kitchen to have breakfast. At the end of my day, the habit sequence ends in the same places where it all started: in the bathroom, now for a shower, followed by my bedroom where I set the alarm on my cell phone and then turn the phone off until the next morning when the sequence will start again. For a minute I imagine myself doing this sequence in slow motion, thinking: "Ok. Where should I start? I am tying my hair now and opening the water faucet. What should I do next? Wet my face and press the bottle of liquid facial soap. Now I need to spread the soap on my face until suds are formed. Now I..."

Tense and tired of imagining the slow motion process of taking each of the steps of my habits consciously, I turn on the autopilot. In doing so, I experience the relaxing power of repetition, which "relieves us of the burden of making the thousands of micro-decisions which would otherwise overwhelm us" (Wilk 2009: 152). Similarly, not having to worry about the micro-decisions of driving, in their

“conference room,” Gary and Bettina opened up the possibilities to unlock the potential in their minds, as they said.

Creating Change and Balance Through Habits

However, the cultural phenomenon of routinization and habits is more complex than simply a sequence of repetition. This phenomenon brings some tension between repetition as a liberating force from constant worry, while at the same time it keeps us in “constant bondage” (Wilk 2009: 152). This tension characterizes routinization as something that we choose as agents, and something that at the same time we follow in the cultural structure of which we are part. In this case, it can be questioned if, through repetition, our habits may actually help us change routines.

Rather than being a polarized phenomenon, liberation and bondage are part of the same experience here, and together they can bring the possibility of transformation. Without having to deal with the stress of thinking about how to do an activity, we may open up space to think of different ways of doing things.

For Bettina, for instance, an important aspect of her routine became taking breaks. But it was not always like that:

I used to have a tendency to edit for hours straight. Sometimes the sun had set and I was so exhausted mentally that I had to lay down and watch a DVD. I fell asleep and the whole thing started again the next day until I had finished that editing. At a certain point, I did get a bit stir crazy and had to just break out! Breaking out can be something as absurdly simple as forcing myself to go for a walk. Or maybe to do some work at the coffee shop where I am forced to deal with new things... yeah, sometimes just doing that actually makes me refine my activities for the next few days or weeks even. Now breaks are sacred for me... (Bettina)

For Bettina, working straight through had become a habit. As a routine, she kept working without realizing that hours had passed and that she had not stopped for a break. She became used to it, repeating this routine until she had what she called her breakout moment. At this point Bettina initiated a new routine that was not as automatic as her habit of sitting and editing straight at first. She had to force herself to stop editing and take a break, which requires a conscious decision. After repeating this practice of taking breaks, stopping for pauses are now part of Bettina’s habits that she does without much effort, ‘automatically’ getting up from time to time.

If life without routines and habits, or some sort of regularity, would be chaotic, the issue becomes how one can maintain enough necessary predictability to keep life structured with the challenges of change. In this case, the ever changing nature of participants’ work and schedules may help them maintain a reasonably balanced attachment to routines. However, there is also a risk that the effect is the opposite of this, as described by Bettina in the quote above, and also that teleworkers turn work into their routine and become too immersed.

Although these participants' work is experienced as a creative calling, it still involves demands and deadlines. Therefore, when keeping professional and personal worlds close to each other, these teleworkers are also putting the demands from both realms in close proximity. This proximity poses the challenge of juggling such close demands through routines. At the same time, proximity also serves as an element to create stability here, as it allows for different combinations of routines.

In a dance between work as a creative calling, personal/family life and work demands, as well as the desire for autonomy, the teleworkers participating in this research project bring routinization to their everyday lives. Through routines, they exert the utmost skill in their lives.

Conclusion

In this applied cultural research, I aimed to uncover layers of cultural processes that help to enact boundaries and structure the lives of independent professionals working from home for the entertainment, new media, and arts sector. My findings bring about awareness of the prominent role that materiality and the processes of routinization play in building boundaries as well as stability. This article suggests that time-space flexibility is not a dichotomic phenomenon but instead a more complex and culturally woven web of everyday life practices.

As a result of this applied research, Studio Can and PalMarte gained awareness of their everyday flexible work life and the implications to reinforce work processes that benefit them specifically. Analysis regarding business growth and how to balance it with the perceived benefits of flexible work or how to deal with the challenges of synergetic team communication when teleworking were some of the concrete outcomes from this research that can help the organizations.

Filling out time-diaries, taking pictures, answering questions, and reflecting on their practices helped guide their understanding of what they do and how they do it. One of the participants, Gary, referred to my research by saying, "just this conversation is enlightening in terms of possibilities. It's inspiring because as we talk to you about what we do, it solidifies old processes and invites new ones." Through this research, practices and details that participants were not aware of were revealed, and can now become 'doors' of improvement for their organizations and work.

The main findings from this research suggests that for teleworkers who work as independent professionals in the entertainment, new media, and arts sector, work and leisure/family life at home are neither totally separated realms nor joined together, but instead they are linked. Although culturally different from each other, these realms are bridged through the material culture that surrounds them. As conveyors, objects such as a heating pad as well as certain activities, culturally transport teleworkers between leisure/family life and work at home.

Changing what they do with objects, participants adjust cultural categories through the material and social world that composes them.

For these participants, the advantages of working from home are autonomy, flexibility to accommodate both leisure/family life and work together, the coziness of a home environment, as well as saving time without needing to commute to work. On the other hand, the lack of synergy with other professionals was considered a disadvantage of working from home for some. For participants who have a spouse and children, the need for a separate space at home that is a dedicated workplace – off limits for family interference – was emphasized as necessary. This is a place that allows them to choose to be away when they need to.

Main findings from this research has also shown that the consistency of participants' flexible routines is more viscous than liquid, and that the habits, rituals, and evolving routines that they develop play a structuring role in their everyday lives. Routines may vary from exercising on the beach, going to the gym, or reading the newspaper in the morning. These activities create familiarity and save participants' energy from a series of daily micro-decisions, which helps them structure their lives. Through routines, these independent teleworker professionals cope with demands from both their personal lives and work.

Lastly, my findings point to stability as a possibility of change. If routines help create stability through repetition, it can also help the teleworkers in this study change their routines while maintaining their flexible schedules. This is a delicate point of balance between the necessary repetition that liberates us from spending energy on the micro-decisions of everyday life and the repetition that ties us in rigid routines that can create new routines. Overall, my research intends to understand the relation between leisure/family life and work, as well as stability and change. Focusing on telework practices can 'rethink' these realms and how they relate to each other, but also how they transform each other. Moreover, this research also helps to rethink the boundaries between academia and applied knowledge. As pointed out by Audrey Williams June, "academics informs practice and practice informs academics" (June 2010: 2). These realms are complementary in the context of the multifaceted nature of cultural research. On the one hand, academia develops the principles and intellectual preparation that we need to work in society. On the other hand, academia is part of the same society and is not isolated from it, but rather influenced by it. Here "the pure and applied distinction is unhelpful" (Sillitoe 2007: 161) and working outside academia helps expand our horizons of understanding.

If the present research, with an applied culturally analytical approach, suggests that time-space flexibility is not a dichotomic phenomenon, likewise, this research also suggests that theory and practice are not binary opposites. Instead, in the same way that work and leisure/family life – or predictability and change – are linked, academia and non-academia are seen here as bridged realms too.

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Notes

- ¹ The project “Domestic Transformer” and how its sliding walls work can be seen in this video: <http://planetgreen.discovery.com/videos/worlds-greenest-homes-hong-kong-space-saver.html>

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