



# Downshifting: Boundary management for the privileged few?

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## abstract

Downshifting is presented in some parts of the academic literature as a strategy for individuals to take back control of their lives, by containing paid work and reaping the benefits in time and quality of life. In this critical reading of the literature, a Foucauldian power relations perspective is utilised in which downshifting is presented as a discursive strategy. By paying sustained attention to power relations, this paper makes visible and questions the taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding representations of downshifting and later draws on boundary theory to problematize its proclaimed emancipatory potential. It contributes to existing work-life theorising by suggesting that the emphasis on decision-making enables the obfuscation of the socio-political context of our lives, thus, we argue that existing inequalities will ensure that downshifting is a strategy only a few can achieve.

## Introduction

Work-life balance is increasingly seen as both important and difficult to achieve as lives become more demanding and complex. This critical reading of the literature addresses one phenomenon that has emerged as a strategy for achieving work-life balance: downshifting. Downshifting is a concept in which the academic community appears to have little appetite, but which has nevertheless steadfastly remained of interest in the public domain. In popular accounts, downshifting is associated with a reduction in work and

consequent benefits in time and quality of life. Downshifting is understood to be a response to increasingly demanding working lives, in which simpler lives are sought involving reductions in income, consumption and environmental impacts (Gottberg, 2015; Kasdagli, 2014; Fergusson, 2016). At the heart of which are families, specifically the desires of downshifter to spend more time with their children (Behson, 2014; McSmith, 2012; O'Sullivan, 2016).

This paper takes the form of a critical reading of the academic literature in which we aim to provide a critical reflection on the emancipatory framework that surrounds the representations of downshifting in this literature. The question we discuss is; is downshifting really a solution to increasingly demanding lives? Should we consider downshifting as positive and inclusive, or should we be alert to the possibility that it is ultimately an indicator of an increasingly polarized labour market and an option for the privileged few? This question will be explored by making visible the taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding representations of downshifting in the literature. To do so, downshifting is interrogated as a discursive strategy, in which multiple discursive elements compete and contradict one another to construct understandings and create space for alternatives (Foucault, 1976). We extend our critical reflection by theorising downshifting as a boundary management strategy. As such, we argue that the emancipatory ideals associated with downshifting, are unlikely to be achieved. In the next sections we outline our approach to the literature.

### **Power, discourse and downshifting**

Within the work-life literature the notion of choice and of individuals as free and choosing subjects is inherent. People are understood to be 'both rational and transparent' to themselves (Deetz, 2003: 24). Thus, downshifting is understood to be a voluntary self-serving decision. Yet, if a power relations perspective is adopted, the notion of a free and choosing subject is shattered, for the subject and its desires are understood to be produced, the result of processes of power (Deetz, 2003; Butler, 1997; Oksala, 1998; Mayo, 2000; Foucault, 1982).

Within such a perspective discourses are understood to be both the result of power relations and to be themselves powerful. They are more than representational (Deetz, 2003; Foucault, 1986; Mumby, 2011), with the capacity to both constrain and enable thinking and actions (Ball, 2013, 2014; Danahar et al., 2000; Adams, 2012). They are situated, in and of their time, socially, historically, economically, politically, contextual. Discourses create the conditions for what is sayable, writeable, doable, thinkable, yet they are always incomplete, always fragmented, always offering space for alternative possibilities (Ball, 2013; Foucault, 1976, 1986).

Discourses are therefore, not prescriptive, but they both legitimise and marginalise. Foucault wrote that 'we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies' (1976: 100). Discourse analysis from this perspective, is interested in what discourses do, rather than the signs and language of which they are comprised (Ball, 2013; Foucault, 1986). It acknowledges that discursive strategies are fluid and unstable, comprised of competing and contradictory elements. It recognises that while they construct taken-for-granted understandings about whom and what is acceptable or appropriate, they also enable resistance and create opportunities for other understandings to be constructed (Foucault, 1976).

This perspective enables the work-life boundary to be held in tension and downshifting to be interrogated as a discursively produced object, comprised of competing discourses, brought together to achieve a multiplicity of outcomes, including the production of particular subjects. It recognises that identities both result from and enable, the exertion of power over others and ourselves (Foucault, 1980a, 1982).

### **Means of investigation**

In order to consider our question: is downshifting really a solution to increasingly demanding lives? We began by identifying relevant academic literature. Keyword searches were made in library catalogues, using the term

‘downshifting’. Newspaper articles, reflections, books and ‘grey literature’ such as reports were included, as well as conventional academic journal articles. Dictionaries were excluded. The results were further filtered to include only those related to the fields of business and economics, sociology and social history, social sciences, psychology, women’s studies and journalism and communications. Because of the scarcity of empirical research and to allow for a more comprehensive account, additional searches were made of PhD theses and reference lists of key articles were also searched. Thus, multiple types of literature were included in this critical reading, making traditional meta-analytic strategies inappropriate (Earley, 2014). Instead, the literature was read and re-read as a whole in light of the initial question; what is downshifting?

Two strands of research were identified, that in which downshifting is understood to be a way to simplify lives by reducing consumption (Etzioni, 1998; Hamilton and Mail, 2003) and career or work downshifting in which the downshifter voluntarily ‘decreases the number of hours of employment’ (Nelson et al., 2007:144; see also Tan, 2000). In both, the notion of work-life balance is implicit and downshifting is understood to be a voluntary, personal decision, which benefits the individual and their families. However, adopting a power relations perspective challenges this interpretation of choice and highlights the derived organisational benefits. These insights led us to consider the implications of the broader work-life literature in relation to downshifting. Specifically, the work-life balance literature and boundary theory. Work-life balance, because of its implicit centrality within representations of downshifting and boundary theory, because it assumes that people try to strategically manage their lives in order to simplify them (Ferguson et al., 2015; Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009), an assumption clearly linked to notions of downshifting.

Given the limited academic interrogation of downshifting, we decided that our understandings could be extended further by reviewing the representations of downshifting in the academic literature in light of work-life balance and boundary theory. To do so, we extended the scope of the literature, within the parameters identified above, and further searches were conducted in which the terms work-life balance and boundary theory were

added (for example, downshifting, work-life balance; downshifting AND work-life balance). A total of 65 pieces of literature were included.

In considering the academic literature, we have understood downshifting to be a discursive strategy. This assumes that a number of discursive elements come into play in the creation of the idea of downshifting and of the identity of the downshifter which create implicit rules about whom can be considered a natural downshifter and the legitimate objectives achieved by downshifting. This is to understand downshifting as a Grand Discourse (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000), but not a totalising one. For this approach recognises the partiality of any discourse and the multiple ways in which they can be enacted to create space for resistance and refusal (Foucault, 1976; Hardy and Maguire, 2016). In Foucauldian terms, one might think of the 'degrees of rationalization' (Foucault, 1982: 223) of the discourse, how effective it is at producing desired results.

The exercise of power is not a naked fact, an institutional right, nor is it a structure which holds out or is smashed: it is elaborated, transformed, organized; it endows itself with processes which are more or less adjusted to the situation. (Foucault, 1982: 223-224).

Thus, the discourse of downshifting attempts to produce particular results, but that does not mean that it will be successful; for it is always in the process of transformation. Consequently, this is not to suggest that there is a single downshifter identity, for Foucault challenged the notion of the homogenized self, fully knowing and knowable and instead offered us a way to theorise identities as partial and continuously produced. In which individuals have agency, but that agency is, itself, a site of struggle, embedded as individuals are in networks of power, between strategies of compliance and contestation (Oksala, 1998; Mayo, 2000; Foucault, 1982). This is an understanding of power as fluid and relational and of knowledge and power as integrated (Foucault, 1980b; Hardy and Clegg, 1999; Hardy and Maguire, 2016). 'It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power' (Foucault, 1980b: 52). To know, is not to be free from power, this departure from the emancipatory ideal of traditional critical studies (Hardy and Clegg, 1999), emphasises the disciplinary nature of the discourse of downshifting, to both

constrain and enable understandings of self, others and our place in the world. Emancipation in Foucauldian terms is focused on illuminating our subjectification (how the workings of power relations attempt to fix us in time and space (Townley, 1993)) so that we might seek alternative possibilities, 'to imagine and to build up what we could be' (Foucault, 1982: 216). This is not a search for our true selves for these are not hidden from us, our identities are not formed in our self-conscious but through interactions with discourses (Foucault, 2007a; Mayo, 2000). The discourse of downshifting is thus an effect and vehicle for power.

Directed by this understanding, our focus when reading the literature was to consider, within the representations presented: who is considered to be a natural downshifter? What are the legitimate objectives achieved by downshifting? Or, to put it another way, what taken-for-granted assumptions are being made about whom or what is acceptable or appropriate in downshifting terms?

We have been guided by Foucauldian notions regarding the disciplinary nature of discourse and governmentality, those techniques working to create managed and manageable populations (Foucault, 1982; Ahonen et al., 2014). In so doing, we have sought to highlight how the workings of power try to individualise problems and their solutions, for example, in the case of downshifting the problematic experiences of work, whilst simultaneously attempting to govern and regulate at a population level.

In the next section we analyse the downshifting literature in light of this approach, paying particular attention to the ways discipline and governmentality inform our critique. We begin by focusing on the connections between work-life balance and downshifting. This illustrates how downshifting is conceptualised as a way for individuals to manage their damaging experiences of paid work. We then develop this further, by considering in more detail how work is presented in the downshifting literature. Before exploring the representations of the workers who are most likely to be identified as legitimate downshifters, parents. We end this section by attending to the notion of consumption implicated in discussions of work within the downshifting literature. We then draw on boundary

theory to illustrate why the emancipatory ideals of downshifter, which have a tendency to be depicted in the literature, might not be achieved. Finally, we consider the contribution that a sustained focus on power relations can make to work-life theorising.

### *Work-life balance*

As we read the academic downshifting literature in light of both work-life balance and boundary theory, we focused upon two key questions, within the representations of downshifting; who is considered to be a natural downshifter? What are the legitimate objectives achieved by downshifting?

Work-life balance/rebalance is said to be one of the key objectives of downshifter (Hamilton, 2010; Laabs, 1996). The downshifter is understood to be taking back control, containing paid work and its demands on their lives. The responsibility for creating the desired balance lies with the individual, they must decide which boundary tactic will enable them to achieve their objectives. In keeping with the current work-life balance discourse, the problems that are addressed by downshifting (such as long working hours and/or stress) are understood to be the individuals. Detrimental/unfriendly employee working practices remain unchallenged and are legitimated by the work-life balance discourse (Fleetwood, 2007; Eikhof et al., 2007; Lewis et al., 2016). Dumas and Sanchez-Burks' (2015: 820) conclude that boundary management strategies serve 'one fundamental purpose from the perspective of the organisation – enhancing individual contributions to the workplace'. Similarly, Pedersen (2011) highlights the functionality of life outside of work, to the service of the organisation. Therefore, downshifting need not trouble the organisation (indeed they may be unaware that it is happening) and may well serve organisational needs for an effective labour force. Ironically, the boundary management strategy of the individual, used for personal benefits, may be far more advantageous to the organisation, which retains the individual, their experience and expertise, often at a reduced financial cost (given the boundary tactics associated with downshifting that are adopted such as; reduced working hours, declining promotions and so on).

Work, according to the work-life balance discourse is problematic, in so far as it has become too central in our lives (Hamilton and Mail, 2003; Blyton and Jenkins, 2012). Thus the potential for work to be other; satisfying, enjoyable and to provide refuge are often overlooked (Eikhof et al., 2007). As are the positive spillover effects of work such as; the development of friendships, community and pride (Blyton and Jenkins, 2012).

It is evident that this problematic view is also how work is considered in terms of downshifting. To downshift is to enrich your life beyond work. Conversely might it not also serve to reignite interest and enjoyment in work? To the benefit of not only the organisation but the individual. A distinction is made within the work-family literature, between positive spillover and enrichment. Both are understood to be bidirectional. However, positive spillover is considered to be an antecedent of enrichment. Enrichment is defined as the experiences of one domain affecting the quality of life of the other, thus, the positive spillover effects of work improve the quality of family-life (Masuda et al., 2012; Chan et al., 2016). If, therefore, work is considered to be enriching, might not downshifting negatively impact upon the quality of life within and beyond work?

Work-life balance is understood to be more inclusive; relevant to the needs of a broader range of people and pursuits than its predecessor family-friendly approaches (Dex and Smith, 2002; Doherty and Manfredi, 2006). However, examination of the debate suggests that this discourse is still constructed around the legitimacy of the needs of parents and in particular mothers (Eikhof et al., 2007; Ford and Collinson, 2011; Burnett et al., 2013; Gattrell et al., 2013). Indeed those who access work-life balance initiatives for other reasons are understood to be 'less committed and more likely to leave their organisations' (Waumsley et al., 2010: 4). The norm of the 'ideal worker', dedicated to work and unencumbered by other responsibilities is evident in this work-life balance discourse (Ellem, 2005; Aluko, 2009; Fujimoto et al., 2013; Dumas and Sanchez-Burks, 2015).

The contradictory nature of discourse and discursive practices is highlighted here. On the one hand work-life balance is understood to be for all workers, on the other, norms and practices construct it as a need of a very particular



group of people. In downshifting terms, there is both anecdotal and empirical evidence of the relevance of the concept to a broader range of people than mothers, however, they are still constructed as legitimate downshifters (Chhetri et al., 2009). Perhaps, the continuing feminisation of work-life balance (Lewis et al., 2016), serves another function, to further delegitimise the need for changes to workplace practices (Aluko, 2009). As the enduring individualisation of needs and solutions, (including downshifting), to the damaging effects of work, facilitates the continuance of problematic workplace practices.

The seductive nature of work-life balance and the yearning it creates for a particular way of living, is itself powerful, as people survey themselves and monitor their attempts to maintain/achieve the identity of the perfectly balanced individual (Ford and Collinson, 2011). The utopian ideal, created by the downshifter identity is often not just about how lives are lived (connected to the consumptive discourse) but where they are lived (Thomas, 2008; Hamilton and Mail, 2003). The associations between downshifting and the simple living/voluntary simplicity movement are most evident at this end of the continuum of downshifting, in which people are understood to both give up work and move to pursue simpler lives (Etzioni, 1998; Hamilton and Mail, 2003).

The discourse of work-life balance associated with downshifting exhorts the individual to take responsibility for managing, (through containment), their damaging experiences of paid work and pitches downshifting as the solution. In this vein, downshifting can be conceptualised as privatised resistance, but as such it is likely to fail because the problems it is designed to address 'are fundamentally collective, social and political' (Thomas, 2008: 688).

### *Work*

As we have seen in the discussions above, downshifting is understood in relation to work, without it, it does not make sense. This is further illustrated by the variety of ways in which boundaries are described within the downshifting literature; the distinctive boundary is always between work *and...something* else. Work and 'friendship, family and personal

development' (Levy, 2005: 176); work and leisure (Juniu, 2000; Nelson et al., 2007; Kennedy et al., 2013); work and life outside of work (Laabs, 1996); work and free time (Chhetri et al., 2009); work and family (Joyner, 2001). This 'work *and...*' perspective illuminates the centrality of work within understandings of downshifting.

The downshifting literature, like much of the boundary theory literature, documents work as greedy or unbounded and needing to be contained (Drake, 2001; Nelson et al., 2007; Juniu, 2000; Joyner, 2001; Thomas, 2008; Cohen, 2010; Kennedy et al., 2013; Dumas and Sanchez-Burks, 2015). People are working too much and work is intensifying. Work is getting in the way of what people would rather be doing; spending time with friends, family and on leisure activities and is negatively impacting upon health (due to increasing levels of stress), families and communities (Kennedy et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2007). Work itself is undesirable. Yet work enables us to participate in these other activities (Juniu, 2000). This paradox, the necessity of undesired work, leads to an interpretation of downshifting as a trade-off, between work and life (Levy, 2005; Nelson et al., 2007). Downshifter remain active within the workforce, to differing extents, but their labour is understood to be functional, to serve their other life needs, roles and identities. While this might be construed as a preference for segmentation and the separation of work and life, borrowing another term from the work-family literature, role embracement, 'the zeal with which one enacts a role' in terms 'of energy and time' (Kossek et al., 1999: 106), downshifting can be interpreted as the embracement/investment in non-work roles by the downshifter, which does not necessarily mean that they are also engaged in the segmentation of roles – the construction of non-overlapping boundaries between them (*ibid.*). Downshifting might facilitate the downshifter to engage in integration practices such as the assimilation of their work and non-work identities (Ramarajan and Reid, 2013), or allowing the physical boundaries between work and lives to be permeable by, for example, using technology to work from home, or allowing work to interrupt non-work activities (Cannilla and Jones, 2011). Thus, downshifting, while often construed as a segmentation strategy may not necessarily be so. Indeed, it might be used by an individual to enable the segmentation of other lives

from work while simultaneously enabling the integration of these other lives into work. Strategies which might change as individuals negotiate the demands of their evolving situations (Cousins and Robey, 2015; Golden and Geisler, 2007).

The discourse of downshifting is focused around a sense of loss; something is missing/lacking in the downshifter's life and downshifting is a way to address this. Downshifting is thought of as a quest, a search for an alternative sense of purpose, or meaning in life, which can be achieved by turning away from work and emphasising other activities/areas of life (Levy, 2005; Drake, 2001). To strive for such a goal, is reminiscent of the search for one's true self (Oksala, 1998), which Foucault (1976, 2007b) argues is the modern illusion; an impossible task for individuals are never hidden from themselves and as such an endless one designed to discipline and create populations that can be managed. Therefore, while downshifting might be understood as an act of resistance to the demands of work and its negative impacts, it might also be construed as a re-inscription of governance linked to the state (see Foucault, 1982). Despite this, what the concept of downshifting does, is challenge our fundamental understandings of work, why people work and what the nature of that work should be. Work as a 'taken for granted social fact' (Casey, 2000: 573) is questioned. Downshifting allows space for alternative conceptions of work, such as Levy's (2005: 189) 'effortful engagement in difficult practices' to emerge.

Within the traditionally problematic conception of work portrayed in the downshifting literature, the question of who can downshift remains. For individuals are differentially located and rewarded within the labour market. While Hamilton and Mail (2003) argue that people from across the income spectrum engage in downshifting, downshifting is commonly associated with the economically wealthy:

They [downshifters] may be high-achievers, in the sense that they hold down prestigious jobs and accumulate a great deal of wealth. Yet they feel their lives lack point. (Levy, 2005: 178)

This would suggest the potential exclusivity of downshifting and the identity of downshifter. Perhaps economic disparities preclude certain groups of

people from downshifting? Hamilton and Mail's (2003) own research suggests that income effects the boundary tactics used, the reasons for downshifting and the experiences of the downshifter. Kennedy et al. (2013) highlight the relevance of class and race to enabling or inhibiting downshifting. Blyton and Jenkin's (2012) conclude that the adoption of part-time work (an often suggested downshifting tactic) may not achieve its desired outcomes. Their study suggests that for part-time work to be a success and result in the desired for balance, there are certain structural conditions of that work that need to be considered, including; the predictability of work patterns, affordable and timely access to work (in terms of distance to travel and the availability of travel options) and level of pay. It is reasonable then to propose that downshifting might be differentially experienced according to an individuals' position in relation to these conditions of work. This might explain the differing experiences of downshifting Hamilton and Mail (2003) discuss in their study and is commensurate with Jarvis's (1999) conclusion that what is possible in terms of managing boundaries is dependent upon our social and spatial networks; the people and places through which individuals access and offer support and knowledge. Choosing to downshift and it is always depicted as a choice, is discussed in terms of individual or family decisions, the potential influence of these wider socio-structural forces are most often ignored. Boundary theory and boundary management studies have been similarly criticised for their partiality, as organisational, cultural and regulatory specificities are overlooked (Piszczek and Berg, 2014; Cohen, 2010).

### *Families – parenting*

As we read the literature, it became apparent that the workers who are most likely to be identified as legitimate downshifters are parents. A clear assumption underpinning the boundary work/tactics associated with downshifting is that people are spending too much of their time working and downshifting can help to address this. Spending more time with their children is identified as one of the key objectives of downshifters, both within academic and non-academic discourse (Hamilton and Mail, 2003; Kennedy et al., 2013; Behson, 2014; McSmith, 2012; O'Sullivan, 2016). Workers are differentiated by their parental status, to be a parent legitimates

your need to downshift. Conversely, to not have children, precludes others from legitimately identifying with the identity of downshifter. In this way understandings of life beyond work and its importance comes to be limited by the discourse. Within these representations of downshifting the parent is considered to be a natural downshifter. Their need to spend more time with their children is a legitimate downshifting objective.

Perhaps, downshifting also offers the opportunity to fulfil the increasingly 'classed, gendered and racialized' role of parent (Kirton, 2013: 662), including the capital accumulation of their children (*ibid.*). Thus, the downshifter's time spent with their children is designed to achieve something, it is instrumentalised with the future in mind. The role of parent is as open to the possibilities of self-surveillance and discipline as that of the identity of the perfectly balanced individual, or the consumer. Once again, it is possible to see how downshifting maybe understood as a re-inscription of governance linked to the state and the desire for managed and manageable populations (Foucault, 1982), for the parent is tasked with responsibility for the disciplining and competitive positioning of their child within a marketised economy (Kirton, 2013; Knudsen, 2011).

### *Consumption*

In some representations of downshifting, it is presented as a response to increasingly demanding working lives, in which an important objective of the downshifter is to reduce their consumption and extract themselves, or, at the very least, decrease their engagement in the work-consumption cycle (Gottberg, 2015; Kasdagli, 2014; Fergusson, 2016; Drake, 2001; Etzioni, 1998; Hamilton and Mail, 2003; Szmigin, 2003; Juniu, 2000).

Consumption is understood in these representations to be problematic, at both a societal and individual level. Societies are understood to be undermined by the excessive individualism promoted by consumption, the subsequent demise in civic engagement and the consequent environmental damage (Nelson et al., 2007; Thomas, 2008). The consumption of products, services and goods is thought to be powerful, an act which has the potential to be addictive. Increasing levels of consumption drive the need for higher

income levels. Thus, the consumer is understood to be trapped in a relationship of power with consumption, in which consumption is the more powerful actor. To downshift then is to reassert power, to take back control and decentralise the role of consumption in our lives and in so doing to rethink our relationship with the source of our income (usually work) (Drake, 2001; Etzioni, 1998; Hamilton and Mail, 2003; Szmigin, 2003; Juniu, 2000).

However, this conceptualises a powerful (consumption) – powerless (consumer) relationship which contradicts a Foucauldian understanding of power relations (Hardy and Maguire, 2016). Instead let us think of consuming as an act in which people are ‘simultaneously undergoing and exercising power’ (Foucault, 1980a: 98). It is both the result of power over us (cultivating our desires to have more) as well as power with (in the act of consuming). Following Foucault (1982), the consumer is both the result and conditions of this power relationship. The downshifting literature presents the reassertion of non-consumptive priorities in an emancipatory light; individuals can break free from the cultural institution of consumption. Yet downshifters who engage in alternative practices of consumption have reported experiencing intense feelings of failure (Schreurs et al., 2012). The Foucauldian understanding of the consumer helps us to explore this perhaps unexpected experience, their subversion is problematic for it challenges their understandings of themselves. If they are not a traditional consumer for whom acquiring more is a validation of their success (*ibid.*), then who are they and how are they successful? As Sandiford and Seymour (2013) and Hoedemaekers (2016) conclude, consumption is implicated in the production of self.

## Discussion

The question we asked at the beginning was; is downshifting really a solution to increasingly demanding lives? As we have seen, the literature has a tendency to depict downshifting in an emancipatory light, thus, downshifting is a way to; wrestle control from too much work or too much consumption, find a new purpose in life, or spend more time with our children. Drawing on boundary theory we will now argue that downshifting

can also be considered to be a boundary management strategy. As such, it is unlikely to achieve the emancipatory ideals purported, because an individual's decision cannot, by itself, address the broader socio-political experiences that the downshift is designed to address.

Boundary theory proposes that people construct and maintain boundaries around the different domains in their lives to simplify them (Ferguson et al., 2015; Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009). Boundaries are distinguished between the personal and the professional (Dumas and Sanchez-Burks, 2015; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013; Golden and Geisler, 2007), work and family (Cousins and Robey, 2015; Kossek et al., 1999; Chen et al., 2009; Piszczek and Berg, 2014), work and life (Cohen, 2010; Cannilla and Jones, 2011) and work and home (Kossek et al., 1999; Fonner and Stache, 2012; Mustafa and Gold, 2013). These boundaries are understood to be social, spatial/physical and/or temporal in nature (Cohen, 2010; Fonner and Stache, 2012) and to vary in strength depending upon their permeability (Golden and Geisler, 2007; Cousins and Robey, 2015), how easily a person can engage in activities in more than one domain simultaneously (Chen et al., 2009; Ashforth et al., 2000; Ferguson et al., 2015) and flexibility (Cousins and Robey, 2015; Ferguson et al., 2015), 'the degree to which roles are tied to specific settings and times' (Chen et al., 2009: 83).

It is assumed that people and (to a lesser extent) organisations use boundary management strategies to segment or integrate the differing domains of their lives/their employees lives, to varying degrees (Golden and Geisler, 2007; Cousins and Robey, 2015; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2009; Fonner and Stache, 2012; Ashforth et al., 2000), as a way to manage their multiple roles or workplace identities (Dumas and Sanchez-Burks, 2015). It is also assumed that individuals have a general preference, either for segmentation of roles or identities; such as the containment of work, or the protection of the personal (Golden and Geisler, 2007); or integration of domains (Fonner and Stache, 2012; Piszczek and Berg, 2014).

A distinction can be drawn between boundary management strategy, understood 'to refer broadly to whether people integrate or segment' and boundary work or boundary tactics which refers to peoples' 'specific

behaviours within each of these strategies' (Dumas and Sanchez-Burks, 2015: 807; see also Kossek et al., 1999). Thus, downshifting might be thought of as a boundary management strategy, traditionally understood to achieve a segmentation of work-life domains, as people seek to slow down at work to improve other aspects of life (Laabs, 1996). The specific behaviours associated with downshifting, 'such as declining or not seeking promotions, reducing working hours, changing careers, or withdrawing from the workforce (Laabs, 1996)' (Cockman, 2015: 185), can be thought of as boundary work or boundary tactics.

While press and academic publications emphasise downshifting as a segmentation strategy, which enables people to manage their multiple roles, we earlier suggested that downshifting might be both a way to segment and to integrate lives, as well as to manage identities. Thus, the notion of general preferences associated with boundary management decision-making is challenged.

Like boundary management preferences, downshifting is sometimes thought of as existing on a continuum (Nelson et al., 2007). Etzioni (1998) for example, defined downshifters within his typology of voluntary simplicity practitioners. These were people he saw as subverting the consumerist culture. Downshifters, being the most moderate example, create an appearance of simplicity, but do not reduce their income, whereas holistic simplifiers, significantly alter both where and how they live (*ibid.*). In contrast, Hamilton and Mail (2003) proposed that downshifters make long-term changes to reduce both their income and consumption, sea-changers, give up work and move and voluntary simplifiers, like Etzioni's holistic simplifiers, are motivated by principle.

Within both the boundary management and downshifting literatures connections are made between choices and life satisfaction. Cannilla and Jones (2011) for example, propose that individuals can choose the boundary management tactics that offer them the best life satisfaction and 'recalibrate their choices' if the outcomes are not as expected. Satisfaction is, therefore, a choice individuals can make for themselves, if only they can make the right choices. Thus, the more knowledge accumulated about the different tactics



available, 'behavioral, temporal, physical, communicative' (*ibid*: 210), the better equipped they are to affect the desired for outcomes. The onus is on the individual, if they are not achieving what they want, it is because they are using the wrong tactics, or using them incorrectly. If only they can develop adequate knowledge, they can be satisfied with their lives. However, as Cohen (2010) and Blyton and Jenkins (2012) conclude, structural differences in the nature of work are implicated in a workers' ability to maintain boundaries, in particular their employment security/insecurity. As are the networks, both social and spatial, within which people are embedded (Jarvis, 1999). The development of knowledge is therefore insufficient to achieve the desired outcomes expected when using a boundary management tactic, including those associated with downshifting.

In downshifting terms, when confronted with a lack of evidence for the link between downshifting and life satisfaction Chhetri et al. (2009) suggest that it might be due to the internally driven nature of satisfaction. Thus, satisfaction cannot be accounted for because it is personal, individuals decide what is important/not to them. The rational, free and choosing subject is apparent in these understandings. In both the boundary management and downshifting literatures the individual/subject as responsible agent is clearly being constructed. As is an understanding of boundary management and tactics as an individualised strategy, in which individuality is understood to enable flexibility and consequently to result in the best possible outcomes. However, if the problem the strategy is designed to address is understood to be socially produced, it follows that it is unlikely to be solved by an individuals' response, irrespective of their level of knowledge. As Kennedy et al. (2013) conclude, downshifting might improve satisfaction but not in isolation, other 'networks of social support' are needed for the downshift to be successful in these terms. These other networks point to the importance of the location or position of the subject within their social, historical, economic and political context. Although Butler (1995) warned that the notion of subject positions can lead to a return to the idea of essential selves and here that is not intended, acknowledging that the position of the individual is integral to the power-knowledge nexus within which they come to understand themselves and each other, illustrates

how they are thus, a source of knowledge and power and a vehicle for knowledge and power. As others conclude, constructing boundary management strategies, as individual decision making practices is insufficient, as decisions intersect with broader socio-political experiences (Hardy and Sanders, 2015; Jarvis, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have made visible and questioned the taken-for-granted assumptions surrounding representations of downshifting. Drawing on boundary theory we problematized its proclaimed emancipatory potential and contributed to work-life theorising by arguing that downshifting is a boundary management strategy. The important implication of our contribution is that existing inequalities will ensure that it remains a strategy few can achieve. We, therefore, argue that work-life theorising can be expanded by paying sustained attention to power relations. Such a focus illustrates the necessity of consideration of the conditions within which individual decision-making choices are framed. The problematic conception of work and its need for containment, which are central to understandings in both the downshifting and boundary management literatures, obscure the questions and assumptions regarding work and its place in our lives that go beyond those of segmentation/integration within which they are often constructed. We contend that the concept of downshifting (despite its limitations) offers space for alternative understandings of work to emerge.

The discourse of downshifting is assembled from and intersects with, a number of other discourses including those of work, work-life balance, consumption and families. These discourses create rules and expectations about who can be considered an appropriate downshifter and what can be achieved by downshifting. The relatively limited academic interrogation this concept has received, is perhaps indicative of the lack of investigation of the use of boundary management tactics more broadly (Cannilla and Jones, 2011). This might have created greater space for resistance and refusal, as one would expect the 'degrees of rationalization' (Foucault, 1982: 223) of the discourse to be less pronounced. However, its construction from well-

established cultural institutions and norms has constrained opportunities, for example, parents and in particular mothers are construed as legitimate downshifters. Within discussions of downshifting and boundary management more broadly a deficit model of individuals is constructed who are exemplified by their lack of knowledge and understanding of boundary management tactics, consequently failing to make the right choices and unable to achieve their desired work-life balance, or curb their consumptive compulsions. The individual as rational choosing actor is responsible for conflict and dissatisfaction when it occurs. The framing of boundary management and downshifting in such terms enables the implications of the socio-political context to be ignored. Thus, the influence of the structural conditions of work (such as salary, access and working patterns), and social and spatial networks, to help or hinder the would-be downshifter can remain hidden.

At a time when populations in the west are experiencing declining labour market opportunities (Hardy and Sanders, 2015), increasing job insecurity across the workforce irrespective of occupational class (Gallie et al., 2016; see also Casey, 2000; Ramarajan and Reid, 2013) and job status insecurity (although this is particularly associated with lower occupational classes who have less influence over changes to their working conditions) (Gallie et al., 2016; Hyman et al., 2005). That this paper should call for attention to be given to the concept of boundary management strategies and in particular the notion of downshifting, might seem frivolous. However, these evolving employment relations suggest that individuals might seek alternative relationships with and understandings of, work (Casey, 2000), of which downshifting might be one such response.

Perhaps downshifting is an indicator of the increasing polarization of the labour market and of the depth and breadth of inequalities continuing to emerge. Both the downshifting and boundary management literatures suggest that downshifting is/will be experienced differentially, which is perhaps indicative of a hierarchy of downshifters. Associated with the intersection of their social, economic, political, racial and gendered positioning and the consequences therefore of the nature and structural conditions of their work and the 'choices' this affords. Given the breadth of

academic literature that discusses the limiting implications of gender, race and social class on occupational outcomes (Blyton and Jenkins, 2012; Catanzarite and Strober, 1993; Hooks, 2015; Savage et al., 2013), and the increasing recognition of their importance in questions of work-life balance (Gatrell et al., 2013), we suggest that these will have a considerable impact on an individuals' ability to downshift and their likely experiences of downshifting if it is undertaken. We have argued that for downshifting to achieve its proclaimed potential a number of important elements need to be considered including; the conditions of work, geographical location, and the people and places through which support and knowledge is accessed. All of which leads us to propose that downshifting is really a question of continuing white male privilege and their exploitation of 'individual gratifications' (Nelson et al., 2007: 144). Hooks (1995) wrote that dominant cultures privilege the interpretation of revolt, because it enables their values to remain centred. By interpreting downshifting as a revolt, a pushing back of cultural expectations, those expectations and values themselves remain unchallenged. Thus, we do not need to consider the existing structures, which enable and facilitate the exploitation and domination of others in daily life. The inequalities that shape our societies, enabling some to succeed at the expense of others. By recognising that downshifting is a 'choice' that so few in society can make successfully, downshifting no-longer seems like a revolt, because those who do so have benefited/do benefit, (knowingly or not), from the exploitation of others to be able to make and sustain that choice. Such an analysis warrants the simultaneous recognition of labour as both stable and influx, focusing attention on the inequalities that remain or are themselves being transformed and the roles that they play in boundary management decision-making. It also raises doubts about the theoretical and practical value of general preferences associated with boundary management strategies.

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