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GENDER & TELEWORKING IDENTITIES: RECONSTRUCTING THE RESEARCH AGENDA

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine from an employee perspective, the promises made on behalf of telework as a new work practice. We are especially concerned with the relationship between gender and telework in relation to home work boundaries, since gender roles in society are largely shaped by home and family. Drawing on management and organisation studies, in the first half of the paper we develop a critique of proposed advantages for women home workers by deconstructing the set of benefits which are said to be delivered by this new socio-technological ensemble. Having once outlined the problems to which teleworking is posed as the solution, an alternative set of issues are generated by recourse to existing literature on women and information technology. In the second part of the paper, we then move to construct an alternative research agenda which is focused to provide a more thorough-going review of concerns faced by employee's working at home, using information and communication technologies, and at a distance from the host organization. The re-orientation on employee-centred priorities is enhanced by engaging with current writings on the changing nature of work identities in the risk society. In conclusion, we underline the contribution of this paper and the research agenda for IS research and for those agencies engaged in ameliorating employees rights at work.

Key words: women, teleworkers, identity, new work practices, risk society, critical

1 INTRODUCTION

Information Systems professionalsⁱ form one of the four dominant groups of teleworkers (Kompast and Wagner, 1998). It is arguable that the number and types of jobs included in this group will expand, and likely that access to teleworking possibilities for IS professionals will grow in the near future. Given the past record of disadvantages experienced by women in the IT profession, the opportunities of combining work and home life may well be proffered as a solution to 'bring more women in' (Adam and Green 2001). This paper is concerned with analyzing the strengths and weakness of such a 'solution'. In order to do so, we have recourse to a broad range of literature from management and organisation studies that deals with telework from an employee perspective.

As Jackson and van der Wielen (1998, p. 12) note: 'Many advocates of teleworking have underestimated the social and organisational changes necessary for successful innovation'. Consequently, the focus of the paper is concerned with examining the effects of home teleworking on people's gendered lives, specifically asking if and how such new work practices can result in amelioration of working conditions and even emancipation. Key assumptions in the paper include the fact that gender relates to both men and women; and that from a materialist perspective, gender roles in society are largely shaped by tasks and characteristics related to roles in the family. Many of the advocates of teleworking have espoused its beneficial aspects for society, organizations and individuals. For example, Robey and Jin (2004, p. 151) claim that 'work is increasingly mediated by technologies that potentially liberate workers from specific places and times.' For our purposes, we will concentrate on the individual employee perspective and the claims for the emancipatory potential of teleworking in the home. Teleworking, it is argued, will bring benefits to those (predominantly women) workers who struggle with the double burden of responsibilities of paid work and family care. The benefits are realized by the offer of 'flexibility' (Daniels et al. 2000, Sturgeon 1996, Huws; 1993) which will remove those barriers deemed to stand in the way of easier management of this burden.

By adopting a critical approach to deconstruct the claims made on behalf of telework in relation to emancipation, we will seek to reveal some of the assumptions that have given rise to elusive promises. Having its own set of criteria and aims, a critical approach will enable us to specify which of the problems faced by workers telework is deemed to solve. A correlation of this is to examine previous IS and management research concerning gendered working conditions and their relation to IT and reveal a host of problems that are not tackled by the telework advocates (Haddon, 1998). This deconstruction is intended to pave the way for an alternative research agenda the outcome of which is intended to assist those agencies primarily concerned with ensuring workers' welfare and the furtherance of the dialectic of equity (Bhaskar 1998). The reconstruction of the research agenda attempted in this paper is one which explores issues of identity construction as a window onto the effects of home teleworking on the negotiation of the home-work boundary.

2 DECONSTRUCTION

In this first half of the paper we pursue a deconstruction of the promises made on behalf of teleworking. Firstly, we provide some background on teleworking, define terms and scope the area of interest. Next, we provide a description of the critical tool to be employed for the deconstruction of proposed benefits for workers which follows. Finally an alternative list of problems is constructed.

2.1 Teleworking

The idea of telework has been with us for more than 20 years and is said to be '*one of the major forms of new modes of work which will be established in the Information Society*' (Qvortrup 1998, p. 22). But, despite promising so much, results have been disappointing. In attempting 'to go beyond description' (Daniels et al. 2001, p. 1153), and by examining some hitherto under researched areas,

one of the associated aims of our research is to discover possible reasons for the gap between such magnified predictions in contrast to more modest outcomes. This is pursued in an exploration of the impact on fractured identities in relation to community, family and the world of work; in particular that of telework as a new form of work organization. In so doing we refer to the growing literature on the teleworking phenomenon in IS research however also drawing on the theorization that has occurred in other disciplines in the hope of assisting the progress of IS research to date.

Although 'virtuality' appears to mean various things to different people (Schultze and Orlikowski 2001) telework, by contrast, is generally agreed as encompassing three broad classifications of work forms: home-based teleworking, teleworking from remote offices and mobile teleworking (Gray et al. 1993). Whilst there have been a wealth of studies concerning call centre workers in recent years, there is arguably, less research concentrating on the other types of teleworking practices. Even fewer studies have focused primarily on the employees perspective, and in particular, the impact such work practices have on identity construction of teleworkers. Care is needed in studying home workers not only because of the added difficulties caused by the distribution of workers in multiple locations, but also in relation to the work itself (Robey and Jin 2004, p.154).

Our research adopts the term, telework a conscious choice on our behalf since: a) it contains the word, work rather than organization which is more appropriate when focusing the study on the employee; b) e-work is currently popular but is not as descriptive of the work relationship to the employee as telework, and at its extreme may be misleading if associated only with 'e-business'; c) while it is generally understood that 'virtual' work can mean to work at a distance, there exists a potential ambiguity with 'physicality' and 'non-reality' of the work practice, again at its extreme the term 'virtual work' may even denigrate the effort necessary for employees to carry out such work practices and therefore makes this particular term unsuitable for our ends. In contrast, the prefix 'tele' has a literal translation of 'far' or the producing or recording of results *at a distance*. Utilising the term telework has the added value of reminding us of the telecommunications essential to the conduct of the work performed. Hence, telework is defined as work that is carried out at a distance from the core organization through the medium of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). As Gray et al. (1993) state:

teleworking...entail(s) working remotely from an employer, or from a traditional place of work, for a significant proportion of work time. Teleworking may be on either a full-time or part-time basis. The work often involves electronic processing of information, and always involves using telecommunications.

According to Webster (1996, p. 3), the study of gendered jobs and roles is important in order to show 'how women come to perform tasks which carry the imprint of their socially constructed roles in the family and in the workplace'. Further, an exploration about how such a fusion affects identity the claim of Alvesson and Billing (1997, p. 19) that 'constructions of masculinity and femininity permeate social life, and guide and constrain people's behaviour in particular through defining the identities of men and women' can occur.

From an organizational perspective, telework as a new form of work poses potential advantages whilst entailing new problems for both management and employees. For the organization, there are prospects of improved productivity, employment incentives, improved employee retention, increased staff flexibility, cost and office space control (Kelly 1985, Duxbury et al. 1987, Kinsman, 1989). However, from a management point of view, the promise of these improved prospects is compromised by worries about control, monitoring and trust. From the employee's perspective, individual employees could expect reduced commuting time and costs (Di Martino and Wirth 1990, Ward and Shabha 2001) leading to reduced stress and a better quality of life (Huws, 1993). Additionally, there is an appeal of a greater sense of freedom in avoiding an area of life that connotes the end of leisure time, as well as more contact with children and sustained membership in non-work communities. On the other hand, this absence from the host organization brings a cost of 'invisibility'. Interestingly, the supposed improved working conditions of employees is said to bring benefits to the organisation: managers see

workers as more productive than on-site staff due to fewer interruptions, less motivation problems, reduced travel time, greater job satisfaction (Huws, 1993); a reduction in turnover and absenteeism rate among teleworking respondents (Frolick et al. 1993, Bricknell, 1996). On a societal level, the attendant reduction in commuting will ameliorate pollution levels and offer inclusion to hitherto excluded groups, such as disabled people and women tied to the home through family responsibilities; longer term, society may pay a price for the retreat of women back into the home.

The freedom to carry out traditional tasks and roles is the key point for us in this paper. Promises of flexible working hours and the option to work from home, offer the opportunity to raise a family while pursuing a career (Sturgeon, 1996). This is most forcefully expressed by Huws (1993, p. 45) who states that ‘the ability to combine work harmoniously with the demands of raising a family is often the main advantage of teleworking’. This latter point is an instance of benefits expressed without the counter balance and context of associated costs. By contrast, Daniels et al (2001, table 1) construct a proposed framework for organizational analysis related to telework using a table of hypothesized costs and benefits. This offers one opening to our own concerns in this paper. Table 1 shows how each proposed benefit has an associated cost which should at least make us wary of accepting on face value the promises described above. It is likely that the supporters of telework expansion are not concerned with identifying the tensions that exist between benefits and associated costs.

Hypothesized individual benefits	Hypothesized individual costs
Chance to remain in work despite moving home, becoming ill or taking on family care roles	Fewer chances for development or promotion, and the perception that teleworkers are not valued by their managers
More time for home and family	Increased conflict between work and home
Reduced commuting	Limited face-to-face contact with colleagues and social isolation
Greater job autonomy	Routinization of tasks
Less disturbance whilst working	More time spent working
More flexible hours	Lower job security
	Weakened collective representation

Table 1. Hypothesized costs and benefits of teleworking (derived from: Daniels et al, 2001)

2.2 A ‘critical’ tool for deconstructing the promises of telework

As we have seen above, telework is variously claimed to have some emancipatory potential. In pursuing the goal of changing the world for the better and for the creation of structures that are wanted, needed or generally emancipatory, the critical approach has been experiencing increasing popularity in the IS world, (for instance: Dobson, 2001; Ngwenyama, 1991; Mingers, 2001; Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; and Carlsson, 2004). A critical approach seeks to challenge the many claims made on behalf of teleworking and the rhetoric about the blanket benefits for employees who now are working from home. It is guided by four aims: to deconstruct dominant ideology, to challenge the status quo, to focus on issues of equality and inequality, combined with an over-riding commitment to emancipation (see table 2). Here we will concentrate on a deconstruction of promises made on behalf of the technology (the socio-technical ensemble of telework in our case) and draw the other aims in with this. In relation to telework and gender, adopting a critical approach to deconstruct dominant ideology we focus on the two dominant notions of managerialism and technological determinism. Technological determinism fails to look at the social and organizational context in which IS are devised and introduced. Managerialism, meanwhile, can be criticized for promoting fundamentally capitalist values such as increasing productivity and curtailing worker resistance (Pratten 2000). To be critical of the technologically determinist assumption that more technology and/or more information is necessarily ‘good for us’, implies that we should take a stand against notions that suggest technical progress represents social progress. In information systems research, therefore, it would be expected

that we would criticise such notions associated with technological determinism as they exclude human choice, intervention, and responsibility. Further, a focus on the workers' employment experience in the teleworking phenomenon, challenges the dominant ideology that technology always constitutes the best answer to social problems.

2.3 Critical deconstruction promises of telework for IT women workers

The critical deconstruction of promises made on behalf of telework for IT women workers forms part of the critical approach outlined above and summarised in Table 2 below. Other elements of the critical approach suggest lines of investigation for future research (see research agenda, below).

CRITICAL ELEMENT	TELEWORK & WOMEN: AREA OF INTEREST
Deconstruct dominant ideology	Examine social and organizational context of telework in order to challenge managerialism and technological determinism. Deconstruct promises equating technical with social progress in relation to telework phenomenon.
Questioning status quo	Investigate development and use of IS to increase exploitation of employees. Partnership with non-managerial sponsors in defense of employee conditions.
Equality & Inequality	Seek to identify areas of inequality of treatment and conditions. Explore gendered patterns of work in teleworking workforce.
Emancipation	Seek ways to transform asymmetric relations. Mobilise research and act to prevent degeneration of equity.

Table 2. Deconstructing telework for the study of women teleworkers

Given the outline of benefits described above and the delineation of characteristics of a critical approach to deconstructing such promises, we can now move to critically examine whether telework has solved any work place and/or social constraints that women have traditionally faced. We then need to establish what would be required to solve these problems and how telework might assist in that reformulation of any such problems. Therefore is necessary to deconstruct promises made so far by asking, to which assumed problems is telework constructed as the solution? Conversely, which problems does telework not respond to and by implication removed from the agenda?

To assist us in this task, and to narrow down and generate our target set of problems we draw on some important studies concerning gender, information technology and the IS profession. We take the problems they identify as being important ones faced by women workers in relation to work and IT. Broadly there are some differences in the interpretation of data on women's (under-) representation in ICT's, yet it is generally recognised that the gender inequality exists and constitutes a problem that should be overcome (Baroudi and Igbaria 1995, Baroudi and Truman 1994).

Yet, there is a lack of consensus over the general trends implied by the statistics concerning women's employment in the IT industry. For examples, the future trend is an inevitable road to equality (Betts, 1993) - especially thanks to the Internet phenomenon (Epper Hoffman, 1998). For the more skeptical researchers, there are still reasons for concern since past exclusion patterns may be reproduced in the future (Wood, 1999). Most significantly for our research it has been suggested that traditional home responsibilities severely reduce the potential for emancipation through occupations such as teleworking (Adam and Green, 2001).

At the bottom end of an organization's work ranking, we will increasingly find home teleworkers carrying out clerical work, often involving the transaction processing functions. Webster (1996) reports that despite the changes in skill requirements due to developments of office technology there has not been an equal improvement in career opportunities, influence, or clerical salaries for women. Is this situation something which telework will improve?

Despite past growth in the IT job market, women were much less well represented in the IT sector than in the general workforce as a whole (Wajcman 1991). It has been suggested that as well as the education system (Webster, 1996), discriminatory employment and promotional practices of organizations (Gale and Cartwright 1995) and the ‘nerd’ culture of the IT profession (Taylor 2001) combine ‘to put women off’ mastering the technology, and this has to be addressed at an institutional and organisational level (Miller et al. 2000).

To explore these considerations, the following examples of appropriate problems to be explored in relation to telework have been **derived from existing IS literature**:

How could teleworking overcome the relative absence of women from the (management of) IS design and development?
How could telework overcome the existing division of labour in the workplace and the undervaluation of women’s skills?
How could telework overcome the exclusion of women from IT areas caused by the association of technology with masculinity evident in things such as hacker culture?
From the aspect of women as users of IT systems, how could telework increase confidence, aid training and support and so on?
If women’s role in the workplace is shaped by their home responsibilities, then would telework serve to undermine or reinforce this trend?
Since we know that it is the case that part time workers are often overlooked in the organization, what would be the effect on the marginalisation of women if they are not present at all?
One way for women to improve their conditions has been through collective action, particularly through union organization. Would teleworking affect this in a negative way?

Table 3. *Alternative problems to be solved by telework?*

3 RECONSTRUCTION

In this second half of the paper, we build on our alternative set of problems that may or may not be solved by teleworking, but indicating some new problems that teleworking may bring with it (similar to the ‘costs’ in Daniels et al (2001, table1). We then proceed to suggest the context to be explored in relation to home working – namely the home-work boundary negotiation. Once this is done, we move to outline the identity and risk society literature selected for the research agenda.

3.1 Establishing alternative research foci

In the above section we have seen that telework has been variously proposed as a solution to many problems. These problems are rarely tackled by telework advocates. Yet all these considerations will have repercussions for women’s (conflictual) sense of identity, impacting on their self presentation and identification as mothers/housewives, professional/organizational member, union /community member. Robey and Jin (2004, p. 153) describe the three levels of analysis for studying ‘virtuality’: team, organization, and community. In the research agenda for studying home workers we propose a triangulation of impacts on identity: union, organization, family.

The conclusion is to reconstruct a research foci that addresses inequality and dominant assumptions a new agenda would need to explore how teleworking (especially at home) will alter the worker’s sense of **identity** in relation to the roles at home and at work. A reconstructed research agenda seeks to reveal social and organizational issues largely ignored by those who promise so much on behalf of the technology. So, in order to include all workers what is required is a focus towards other areas of technology development and diffusion (Wilson, 2002). Teleworking is an instance of diffused technology.

3.2 Reconstructing telework, gender and the negotiation of boundaries

Researching teleworking as a phenomenon to increase our understanding of the consequences of new ways of working for different work and non-work boundaries also contributes to reconstructing the research focus away from a managerialist or technological determinist – given the refocused lens onto welfare and quality of life issues for employees (Bibby, 2003). It enables us to analyze the symbolic nature of time and space and how they relate to the meaning and experience of work itself (Haddon, 1998). According to Haddon (1998), there are a range of moral and social principles around which we organise our working and living relationships. These socially organized processes occur when we interrupt the sacred place of home (Kompast and Wagner, 1998). In contrast to feudal relations of production, the home in capitalist society is ideally organised around the principle of love - with work, in contrast, motivated by monetary principles.

Kompast and Wagner (1998) state that the evidence continues to confirm that males' at-home obligations remain traditionally defined. No matter what discrepancies exist in age or educational level, fathers, husbands, partners they all take on far fewer obligations than women to use their time for caretaking and domestic tasks; women with children are likely to work half as much again at home as at their workplace. Therefore to reconstruct the research process, Kompast and Wagner formulate the key question that needs to be asked: what is the relationship between the persistence of at-home patterns to the persistence of at-work norms and expectations? This persistence largely accounts for women's higher at-home workload, and when (over)time at work is seen as a measure of loyalty and career commitment, employee inability to be 'ever available' counts against women's advancement opportunities. Further, women's experience of time is often contradictory and ambivalent. There is a conflict between availability (the willingness to 'fill in', when needed) both at home and at work, and setting time apart for oneself or a project (regardless of ad hoc demands).

A core notion to the issue of new forms of work and changing identity is the concept of 'place' and 'home'. Two points of contention exist when aligning place and home; firstly is the existing association of place 'with' home and secondly the associated imbuing of place as a nostalgic utopia (Massey 1994). Reification of past golden times, is a time where 'woman's' place was in the home and man's place was as the breadwinner. Such dualisms are maintained and perpetuated through images of emotive propositions of times more secure, happier and safer and ultimately what we should strive to reestablish.

Therefore for the reconstruction of a research focus critical consideration must be given to: issues of **context** - how telework interrupts context and how people manage to hold available, connect and manipulate various aspects of context; **connections, closures** and **regionalisations** and their implications for managing boundaries with colleagues, clients and private life, for connecting as well as for keeping places apart; practices of **time management** - how people cope with different temporal regimes, how they deal with issues of presence and accessibility; issues of **co-operation** (and power) - how people balance interdependencies, maintain access to resources, communicate effort and competence. In so doing, we would seek to avoid replicating existing stereotyping of actors and roles in the home, but rather focus on the ways in which findings did not correspond with established norms of behaviour as well as the ways in which they did conform.

3.3 Reconstructing telework identity formation and the risk society

The above issues of context, connections, closures, regionalisations, time management and co-operation can be studied via explorations of teleworkers' identity formation. Existing notions of identity formation posit that the establishment of individual character is achieved when a stable, immutable sense of self, whether rooted in social class, gender or race occurs (Evans 1997). However, the stability of identities at any point in time, whether as 'core' identities which change relatively little, or readily changed identity that is embraced or resisted, and how such change in one component of identity affects the remaining components, has had little imperial exploration to date.

Existing literature examining management technology, changing work, identity and home all focus upon subjectivity identity (see Flecker and Hofbauer 1998, Agre 1999, Holtgrewe 2001). Subjectivity can be understood, according to Habermas, (in Held 1990, 301) as “that which constitutes our world view and that is attained from the sensory experience and then expressed in terms of individual observed reports”. The reconstructing of identity for a study with a critical focus therefore would follow this tradition. Within Information Systems research there is an established and rapidly growing body of work that draws upon social construction as its theoretical foundation to the exploration of people and their relationship to Information Systems (see Trauth and Jessup 2000, Greenhill 2002). However there is a notable gap in research that relates to identity and the impact that Information Systems have on identity construction. Critical research with an empirical focus upon researching telework as an emancipatory consideration aims to address such gaps.

3.3.1 Explorations of the 'self' for working women

The suggestion therefore to reconstruct the exploration of the ‘self’ that historically has been linked to ‘work’ and IS would discuss the impact of the changing work practices and identity construction of the working ‘self’ (Greenhill & Isomäki 2004). Specifically it would examine how new work forms, such as telework, impact on people’s understandings of themselves, as ‘female’, ‘male’ and as ‘workers’. Women have been traditionally associated with home and work life despite their growing presence in the labour market, employment and work organizations. Not only are working lives shaped by home responsibilities but, by the same token people bring into the workplace a mix of skills and relational competencies learned through a lifetime of socialization and the managing and organizing of domestic duties (Colgan & Ledwith 1996). The most influential recent study of work and identity in the context of rapid workplace is that by Richard Sennett (1998), while attempting gender inclusiveness, his research applies far more readily to masculine than to feminine identities. Sennett claims that contemporary work processes are profoundly ‘corrosive’ of ‘character’ or the ‘self’. Telework epitomizes many of the characteristics of contemporary work that Sennett describes and raises questions about the invisibility of management in the virtual workplace, the ways in which ‘the self’ is managed in an environment where the conventional boundaries between work and non-work are more fluid, and the extent to which the workplace connections that are sustained by ICT technologies should be seen as ‘superficial’.

Axelrod (1999, p. 129) argues that women’s identity construction can be seen as holding a relatively good synchronicity between the current workplace changes and women’s ways of knowing and experiencing. The new workplace puts a premium on forms of interaction and communication akin to those which women have traditionally excelled at performing. He observes that work has had a central place in the development of the total personality and believes that this continues to be so. If this is the case the examination of worker’s experiences in teleworking should confirm or refute such assertions.

In this vein and through an emphasis on work and identity, Sennett (1998) has opened up new ways of thinking about the home-work balance and changes at the level of family and personal life. He is concerned with the weakening of work identity and contemporary difficulties in defining what it means to be a good worker. Sennett’s case studies are primarily concerned with men, who are conventionally thought to have centered their identities on work (which extended to their familial identities as breadwinners). In contrast to Sennett, Mirchandani (1998) suggests that teleworkers may produce identities that are more work-centred than those located in the physical workplace. Following Drucker (1993) and Perlman (1991) she found that salaried teleworkers, undertaking professional and managerial work, make more effort to plan and exercise control over their work and to evaluate their own productivity. If they provide a ‘unique challenge to traditional definitions of work’ (Mirchandani 1998, p. 121), they also point to new identities as workers. This group stressed that social interaction in the office was not ‘real work’ and claimed that they could be more productive without such ‘distractions’. They placed a great deal of emphasis on planning and controlling both their paid work and their domestic work and child care. They perceived employers to have demonstrated a high degree of ‘trust’ in them by allowing them to work at home and sought to live up to this trust by disciplining

the self to work intensively and efficiently. Many saw social interactions as linked to inefficient work practices and placing emotional demands on employees.

Although Sennett (1998) does not refer directly to notions of collective organizing in the workplace, this is evidently an issue if his assessment of changes in new work forms is accurate since he purports to observe changes in collective. Hochschild (1997, pp. 131-33) has shown many men and women may be spending more time at (traditional) work because they simply find it more pleasurable than being at home. This later research showed that the emphasis on team work gives people a sense of being important to each other that has made the workplace rather than the family or community the centre of social life. Relationships are rewarding precisely because they are circumscribed and not subject to the regressive pull of intimate relationships at home. In relation to new forms of working trade union agencies have highlighted the additional difficulties in organizing workers who are disparate and whose sense of collective identity was likely to be weaker than in older forms of work. As a consequence teleworking offers new challenges to such agencies (Bibby, 2003).

4 OUTLINING THE RESEARCH AGENDA & OBJECTIVES

Having executed the deconstruction of promises of telework and reconstructed areas for a new research agenda, we now formulate a revised research agenda. The focus of the research agenda we contest should relate to critically addressing concerns faced by women and men working at home, using information and communication technologies, and at a distance from the host organisation. This focus enables the re-orientation on employees-centred priorities through the examination of the changing nature of work identities in the risk society. Although there is a decided emphasis on women workers, the investigation would include an equal number of male subjects and respondents in order to contextualise the findings.

Issues	Examination
Issues of context	How does telework interrupt context? How do people manage to hold, connect and manipulate aspects of context?
Issues of connections, closures & regionalisations	What are the implications for managing boundaries with colleagues, clients and private life? How do people connect to as well as keep apart places - home/ work?
Issues of time management practices	How do people cope with different temporal regimes? How do people deal with issues of presence and accessibility?
Issues of co-operation (and power)	How do people: balance interdependencies, maintain access to resources, communicate effort and competence – home/ work?
Issues of place and space	How do people (dis-)associate activities and emotional responses to geographical locations – home/ work? How do people negotiate the home-work boundary in traditional and contemporary technologically enabled practices?

Table 4. *Issues and examinations for telework research agenda*

We suggest such a research agenda, shaped as it is by the points raised above and emphasising the active agency on the part of actors to develop native strategies of coping with the home-work balance, would contain the following **objectives**.

- To provide systematic empirical evidence concerning contemporary identity practices in telework as an example of changing times and new work practices through primary research relating to telework and a critical examination of extant diverse secondary data.
- To develop an understanding of the processes of social identification via the plurality of research methods (Kaplan and Douchon, 1988; Mingers, 2001; Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Trauth and Jessup, 2000) will include:
 - in-depth interviews regarding the kinds of identities held by teleworkers in relation to other workers carrying out similar types of work in traditional office environments;

- narratives of (gendered) self in relation to workplace communities, home communities and other organizational communities via a series of visual ethnographies;
- analysis of the resulting data sets in order to assess the importance of issues of continuity, pride in work, a sense of connection with other workers;
- exploration of the resulting data set as to how these issues intersect with other demands on teleworkers' time and loyalties.
- To provide insights of practical and policy relevance to core social issues by communicating our assessment of the significance of changes in identities to those trying to organize workers; and by providing recommendations to inform the development of strategies for organizing disparate workers.

Areas for future research

As mentioned above (section 2.2), deconstruction is one element of the critical approach as developed in the section 3. Future research would include the other elements of a critical approach applied to IS professionals and possibly other employees including:

- an examination of the social and organizational context of telework in order to challenge managerialism and technological determinism;
- an investigation of the development and use of IS to increase exploitation of employees;
- the development of partnerships with non-managerial sponsors in defence of employee conditions;
- the identification of areas of inequality of treatment and conditions;
- an exploration of gendered patterns of work in teleworking workforce;
- the pursuit of ways to transform asymmetric relations;
- the mobilisation of research and action to prevent the degeneration of equity.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to contribute to the IS literature on telework in the digital society, by steering a new course in the study of telework. Seeking to go beyond description, the present work has identified a gap in the literature regarding homeworkers. It is also an instance of the enactment of a critical approach to IS research. In combining insights and data from gender sensitive studies of information technology and women at work, we have highlighted some key areas of concern when assessing the impact of home telework on the employees themselves. It is argued that the realigned research agenda constructed here could identify barriers to the take up of offers of flexibility from employers. That said, the paper is, of necessity, anti-managerialist from the outset since it puts forward the view that flexibility of the workforce and associated efficiency gains are likely to be at the expense of employees, increase the areas of inequality. This would imply therefore, in keeping with the dialectic of equity, that such moves should be opposed by employee agencies if found to be detrimental to the employees themselves. Alternatively, should means be discovered to ensure that telework enables the degree of emancipation it promises and improves women's sense of identity at work, then such means are to be welcomed.

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ⁱ In the guise of systems engineers whose job mainly consists of configuring products, sometimes in co-operation with other companies and complementary interests.