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Editorial

Gender, Work and Family in Turbulent Times: Varied Responses to COVID-19 and Future Directions for Research

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Special Issue Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted lives and social routines world-wide, with enduring implications that are continuing to unfold. This collection of research articles conveys some of the ways that families adapted to the situations they found themselves in during the COVID-19 period.

In everyday conversations with friends, family, neighbors and professional colleagues, my sense is that most people would like to put the COVID-19 episode behind them. It is curious that in the current run-up to the 2024 election in the US, apparently neither side sees an advantage in mentioning the pandemic experience. Yet just as the COVID-19 virus itself is still evolving, the wide-ranging social impacts of the pandemic are still in process, with long-lasting but still uncertain implications in the areas of work, family, schools, public health and even urban politics. And from a research point of view, there is still much to be learned about this unfolding series of events.

In this introduction, in addition to reviewing the main themes of the collected articles, I endeavor to make three principal points. First, research about the pandemic period remains far from complete, given the scale of the pandemic and range of both policy and individual responses across the US and around the world. While there were many common experiences, the diversity of responses to COVID-19 is just beginning to be understood. Second, the pandemic raises some questions about social experiments in general and "natural experiments" in particular. Finally, the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on gender inequality and for a wide range of other aspects of social life will continue to require further investigation for years to come.

The articles in this Special Issue shed light on families' diverse responses to COVID-19. Some may believe that we already know all there is to know, while others may be tired of the topic and seek to explore other compelling matters. My hope is that these papers will pique the interest of many readers and begin to suggest how much remains to be learned regarding the pandemic period.

COVID-19 disrupted established patterns on a global scale. The pandemic resulted in the loss of some jobs and the large-scale implementation of remote work. The fact that remote work was successful—at least to some degree, at least in the short term—changed workers' preferences. The widespread success of remote and especially hybrid work gave workers the sense that working at home was feasible and that long daily commutes were not set in stone.

Families in different circumstances, in different countries and cultures, responded to these seismic events in diverse ways. While most of the articles in this collection focus on the domestic division of labor, this review begins with three papers that examine employment and careers.

1. COVID-19, Gender, Employment and Careers

Among COVID-19's earliest impacts was a spike in unemployment. The article by Yasmin Merktehikian and Emilio Parrado examines changing labor force participation in Argentina. Unemployment in Argentina increased sharply during the first months of

the pandemic for both men and women due to severe disruptions in the global economic system. In focusing on the gendered pattern of economic decline and recovery, the authors show that men's employment rebounded more quickly. Women's over-representation in public sector employment proved to be more resilient, but their concentration in informal sector employment slowed their rebound. Many women in Argentina are employed in domestic service, a type of employment that was slow to recover, due in part to enduring concerns about the contagion. Merktehikian and Parrado also discuss the limited success of governmental assistance in buffering the impact of COVID-19 on women in the informal sector.

Two papers exemplify the rich complexity of and variations in the COVID-19 experience for one specific line of work, namely, university faculty. Sarah Thébaud, Charlotte Hoppen, Jennifer David and Eileen Boris collected qualitative and quantitative data on the experiences of faculty at one college campus in the US. Their article focuses on the experiences of 181 faculty with child-care responsibilities. Thébaud et al. report that mothers were more likely than fathers to spend more time taking care of their children. They also find that mothers' care time was less predictable and more likely to interrupt their work flow. The consequences for some mothers could be emotionally draining, with some even reporting exhaustion and burnout. The university in question quickly initiated policies designed to assist faculty with caregiving responsibilities, but Thébaud and her colleagues find that these programs did not go far enough. This study collected data in May of 2021, one year into the pandemic. Since the findings reflect the very disruptive end of the spring 2020 semester and the 2020–2021 school year, follow-up research well into the future will be required to fully assess the extent to which this period had enduring effects on academic careers.

Anna Carreri, Manuela Naldini and Alessia Tuselli pursue a complementary analysis of Italian academics. Their article casts a wider net in order to compare academics with children to their counterparts without children and those at different career stages. They find that COVID-19 increased inequality between these groups. Some were able to focus their energies on research while others found their time and attention divided. Those who were not yet established in secure academic posts were particularly impacted, especially those who were obligated to absorb the carework burden during the lockdown period. Carreri et al. apply an intersectional framework to intra-academic differences in ways that differ somewhat from the way that sociologists in the US employ these terms.

2. COVID-19 Responses as Social Experimentation

We can think of the pandemic as a 'natural experiment'—or set of experiments. In other words, rapid, large-scale changes in social organization and behavior were implemented in a very short period of time. But in fact multiple experiments were set in motion simultaneously. In particular, many day-care centers closed and schools moved to remote-learning modes of instruction. The result was a dramatic increase in care and instructional responsibilities for parents of pre-school and school-aged children. In response to the pandemic, firms shifted many jobs from an office setting to remote or hybrid arrangements. An ideal assessment of the impact of the pandemic on working families would seek to separate these two potentially off-setting factors.

Wen Fan and Phyllis Moen pursue just such a strategy. They draw on data from a sizeable multi-wave study in the US that allows them to differentiate between the effects of remote work and school closures. They find that working parents, and especially mothers, experienced a great deal of stress as a result of trying to work from home while child-care centers and schools were closed. As schools reopened, the positive dimensions of working from home became more apparent. I view these results with cautious optimism because remote work is likely to endure for many workers. In other words, while the disruptive experiences of the pandemic were very serious and even caused some working mothers to leave the labor force, the enhanced flexibility that accompanies remote work is likely to be a positive factor, not just for working moms but also for fathers as well as for those without

care-giving responsibilities. At the end of this introduction, I will return to the question of the long-term effects of the pandemic on gender and families.

Chyi-Rong Tsai approaches the notion of a "natural experiment" in a rather different way. She raises questions about whether husbands and wives who were both working from home were really "in the same place." Her small-scale set of interviews with married couples in Taipei suggests that physical space for paid work was not allocated equally. Husbands settled into more private spaces where their time and concentration were more likely to be protected, while wives tended to work in areas that were more public. Mothers were more easily and more frequently interrupted. In this way, dual-earner couples who were both working from home nonetheless confronted different realities. Women were expected to prioritize their domestic duties as wives while men were able to prioritize their identity as workers.

The theme of culturally-specific responses is further developed in the paper on China by Ting Wang. China's policy response to COVID-19 included an enduring lockdown, which greatly limited people's ability to leave their residences. In this context, Wang shows that men often took on the task of grocery shopping but tended to do even less in the way of other household chores—such as cooking, cleaning and laundry—than before the pandemic. The data also point to the persisting division of labor in multi-generational households. Wang suggests that while shopping took on a masculine connotation, the overall power of gender norms to shape the domestic division of labor remained largely unchanged, despite men and women spending most of their time together at home. This study exemplifies the cultural and contextual specificity of responses to the pandemic.

The COVID-19 experience raises questions about what we can learn from experiments. The public policy and organizational responses to the pandemic outbreak can be viewed as a series of natural experiments that were responses to a natural disaster instead of being intentionally initiated by organizations or researchers. What happens when people abruptly begin to work remotely on a massive scale?

A number of pre-pandemic studies explored the effects of remote work on employers and their families (e.g., Monteiro et al. 2019; see also reviews cited by Fan and Moen). The researchers undertaking these studies deserve credit for investigating the possibility of new and more flexible work arrangements before they became widely adopted. However, the findings of these studies need to be reconsidered in light of the COVID-19 experience in at least four main respects. First, the relatively small number of companies willing to adopt remote work arrangements before COVID-19 were self-selected in many ways. In other words, researchers can conduct an experiment, for example, by giving one unit in a company remote work while requiring employees in another unit to work in person. One can compare any observed differences in productivity or job satisfaction that emerge and attribute those to the effect of working remotely. But if only a small number of companies in industries that are well-suited to remote work are in the experimental pool, the generalizability of the findings from these studies remain uncertain. In short, society-wide experiments differ from company-by-company or division-by-division experiments. COVID-19 resulted in experimentation on a society-wide scale. Changing the location of work was not just the prerogative of individual employers seeking to tinker with work routines. Rather, the lockdowns and other, less restrictive rules imposed by governments and often by employers themselves were implemented on a large scale.

Second, many social experiments do not follow the double-blind design typified by randomized drug trials. Those who had to work in-person, on-site knew that their experiences were different from their remote counterparts.

Additionally, workplace experiments such as remote work and four-day workweeks cannot be completely self-contained. Remote workers interface with clients and with co-workers in other divisions and in other firms who have not signed on to be part of the experiment. The widespread access to and success of remote work led workers to resist employers' demands to return to the office. It was not possible to discern this aspect of remote work in the relatively small-scale pre-pandemic experiments.

Carolyn E. Waldrep, Marni Fritz and Jennifer Glass examine whether workers in the US prefer remote work. They make an important distinction that is not always noted in research in this area, namely that not all jobs are well suited to remote arrangements. For example, many elementary-school teachers complained that grade-school education struggled with remote instruction. Waldrep and her colleagues find wide support for maintaining remote work except among those whose jobs were poorly suited to virtual arrangements. With the exception of these groups, respondents reported enhanced job satisfaction and even enhanced productivity. The key to both was the greater control over their schedules and the flexibility afforded by remote work. When employers attempted to impose "back to the office" rules, some employees acquiesced while others changed jobs in order to maintain their preferred and more flexible work arrangements.

Bringing workers back to the office, moreover, was not simply a matter of going back to the status quo ante. Many employers sought to downsize offices to save on office space. In some cases, employees were back in the office on staggered days. Some employers took advantage of their ability to demand staff return to the office while showing more flexibility for higher-status professional workers.

Finally, understanding the long-term effects on both families and firms requires much longer-term time frames than are usual in experimental research designs. Again, the contrast to double-blind clinical trials of new medications is illuminating. In most cases, medications that are intended to address patients' symptoms are expected to produce rapid physiological responses.

The long-term effects of remote work, however, may well differ from the short-term patterns. For example, while in general the productivity of remote work may be acceptable, over the long-term, challenges in on-boarding new workers and socializing them in the firms' culture may loom larger. Similarly, over the short-term employees may savor the flexibility that accompanies remote work, but over the longer term the diminished contact with co-workers may begin to feel problematic if their accumulated social capital and attendant social integration diminishes.

3. The Gender Division of Housework and Family Care

If the demands of caring, especially childcare, increased during the pandemic, did fathers step up to the plate? In other words, a central question for the pandemic experience then is: "Did dads do more?" The question becomes particularly compelling for dual-career couples where both parents worked from home. On the surface, this situation would seem to create the ideal structural conditions for true sharing of household chores and caregiving responsibilities for both parents. In other words, if both parents are working from home, neither is travelling, and both are physically proximate to children, should this not create the structural basis for gender equality in parenting? Under these circumstances, wives' bargaining power should increase: wives can demand that their husbands to do more, and the husbands have no place to go to avoid this pressure. The reality fell far short of this scenario. Several papers in this collection seek to document and explore the reasons for this pattern.

Daniel Carlson, Skye McPherson and Richard Petts examine whether fathers in the US increased their contributions not just to household chores but to parenting. Fathers' contribution did indeed increase in many cases, but it still fell considerably short of gender equality. While many potential factors may contribute to this pattern, Carlson and his colleagues focus on the issue of gender ideology. Their reasoning is that if a particular couple adheres to traditional gender norms, then one might not expect a rapid conversion to a set of gender-egalitarian household arrangements. In other words, fathers in dual-career couples could be expected to be equally engaged in childcare only if they were committed to egalitarian views about gender and family.

The article by Sejin Um, Anne Kou, Carolyn E. Waldrep and Kathleen Gerson addresses a closely related question, namely, the ways couples define and understand the ideal of work–family balance. They report that many respondents conceive of work–family balance as an individual matter, that is, the ability to attend to diverse time demands in a way that

works for them as individuals. In contrast, other respondents take a more family-centered approach, defining balance with reference to the activities of both partners. This second approach can further be divided into two groups. One views balance as the sum of partners' specialized contributions, with women specializing in caregiving and men specializing in breadwinning. The second group aspires to an egalitarian ideal, where partners put in similar amounts of time and effort and share responsibility in both the work and family spheres. The authors suggest that expectations regarding movement toward work–family balance need to be viewed through this conceptual frame, which recognizes that family members' understandings of balance have different meanings in different family contexts.

The notion that gender is fundamental to beliefs that shape behavior is addressed directly in the subtle paper by Michelle Cera, Golda Kaplan, Kathleen Gerson and Barbara Risman. In attempting to answer the question "Why was the movement toward gender equality during the pandemic so limited?", Cera and her colleagues divided families into egalitarian and inegalitarian groups in terms of their pre-COVID-19 and subsequent situations. They report that satisfaction with the gendered division of household labor is higher—for both husbands and wives—in families with an egalitarian division of domestic labor. In terms of change, however, only a small minority of respondents reported success in moving toward more egalitarian arrangements. The largest group reported no strong desire for change, while another sizable group reported attempting but not succeeding in accomplishing change. Yet a small group of couples were able to use the availability of remote work to put their pre-COVID-19 desire for equality into practice. In other words, while expectations regarding change should be tempered for those families who report little or no desire to change existing arrangements, change can occur when institutional arrangements make it possible to implement egalitarian ideals. Cera et al. label this a case of "sticky gender" to suggest that both structural and cultural change will be required in order to achieve significant progress toward gender equality.

4. Other Dimensions of Family Life

Diverse groups experienced the disruptions caused by the pandemic in different ways. While the novel circumstance of married couples who both work remotely has understandably garnered considerable attention, others in different family circumstances faced a very different set of circumstances.

The disruptive effects of the pandemic were especially pronounced for multi-national families, even for those with considerable economic resources. Rianka Roy, Bandana Purkayastha and Elizabeth Chacko examined the experiences of Asian Indian immigrants in the US during the pandemic. They use the term "dispersed care" to refer to the ways that families—even those located on different continents—can knit together systems of family care during routine circumstances and in cases of medical crises. Travel restrictions as well as immigration rules that limit citizenship opportunities wreaked havoc on the ability of widely dispersed families to provide care during the pandemic.

The themes of housework, childcare and other forms of caregiving, workplace flexibility and gender inequality are the threads that connect the set of papers included in this Special Issue. But even with a focus on the family, there are other aspects of social life that warrant attention.

Marni Fritz, Sejin Um and Barbara Risman consider another important aspect of family life, namely, marital quality. The COVID-19 period increased the amount of time that families in the US spent together. Did this lead to increased discord, or did married individuals find new opportunities to enjoy their partner's company? The majority of respondents reported improved marital quality; the second most common response was no change. The relatively small group that experienced a decline in marital quality also reported problems with the increased demands of domestic labor and childcare.

In my view, this result is largely consistent with the notion that many Americans now experience a "time famine" that constrains family time at home and family activities outside the home. It is ironic that the imposition of time together improved this important aspect of family life. Whether these routines persist post-COVID-19 remains to be explored.

5. The coming decades of COVID-19 research

On May 5, the World Health Organization proclaimed that the global COVID-19 pandemic was officially over. While most people will be happy to put the COVID-19 period in the rear-view mirror, there are many reasons for researchers to continue to study this important period and its enduring effects.

Economists and scholars in other fields continue to conduct research on the causes and consequences of the Great Depression nearly a century after the stock market crash of 1929. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to warrant the same kind of enduring attention.

In his important book, *The Children of the Great Depression*, Glen Elder (1974) showed that the Depression had long-term effects on the cohorts who lived through this cataclysmic event, shaping the experiences of these generations for the rest of their lives. Elder's work has spawned subsequent attention to the experiences that shape the life experiences of particular birth cohorts (Gerson 2003).

While the global health emergency may be over for now, in August 2024, the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) declared COVID-19 to be endemic. In other words, milder and hopefully more manageable strains of COVID-19 are likely to have an enduring presence in the human population. Of course, there is always the risk that more virulent strains may develop, or that humanity will face other deadly virus outbreaks. In any event, it is likely that many important facets of social life will continue to reflect the COVID-19 period for years to come. In addition to the durability of hybrid and remote work discussed above and in this SpecialIssue, many other key social trends need to be tracked over time. Many standard social indicators, such as the test scores of students, women's labor force participation, the shortage of healthcare staff, residential and commercial real estate prices, population shifts and so on will need to be tracked to observe post-COVID-19 trends.

Researchers will need to track the durability of hybrid and remote work arrangements and the wide-ranging implications of this important new pattern of work. Commuting to work is one of the least popular segments of the day. Commutes are often long and include some uncertainty that commuters cannot fully control. Traffic accidents may slow the drive; equipment breakdowns may delay the arrival of the bus or train. Many workers celebrate the reduction in or the elimination of their commute to the office. Yet there is another side to this matter. Mass transit systems depend on a stable level of ridership. Sharp reductions in the number of riders destabilize budgets. In the worst-case scenario, reduced ridership leads to cuts in service, which in turn further reduces ridership.

Similarly, the value of commercial real estate in central business districts has declined—sometimes sharply—as many cubicle-filled offices sit empty. Efforts to convert these structures into much-needed residential living spaces are underway, but this task is proving to be difficult and expensive, as many buildings are not well suited to this type of conversion.

Retail stores and lunch counters are among the many establishments located in central business districts that depend on extensive foot traffic. Cities depend on active business centers, and thus it is not surprising that mayors have become among the leading advocates of employees' return to the office. In short, the impact of hybrid and remote work arrangements is continuing to unfold.

Future policy makers will draw on the pandemic experience in order to develop approaches to controlling the spread of disease outbreaks in ways that minimize social and economic disruption and are considered acceptable to the affected populations. But since no two situations will be identical, we need to be careful about how we apply the insights gleaned from these experiments to future situations. Future pandemics will differ in the severity of the illnesses, in the transmission rates and in the speed at which medications and vaccines may become available. To be sure, responses to future pandemics will need to be based on the best available evidence, but it will take wise leadership to draw the right inferences from messy and incomplete data as applied to unique and incompletely understood situations. Epidemiologists and virologists will continue to be busy. New ways of monitoring outbreaks will be deployed and the race to develop vaccines to keep up with the evolution of new strains of viruses will be an ongoing challenge.

The central theme of the papers in this collection is gender equality, particularly in terms of domestic arrangements and in the labor force. While initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic presented great challenges to working parents and working mothers in particular, future trends remain harder to predict, as changes to date hold both promise and peril for women's opportunities. More careful and detailed studies of diverse population groups, in particular family situations and unique occupations, will help to fill in the missing pieces of the COVID-19 puzzle, and future studies will help us to track its long-term consequences.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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