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Exploring the domestic division of labour when both parents are involuntarily working from home

Abstract

As part of the UK's response to the COVID pandemic many co-habiting parents simultaneously began working from home, often involuntarily, potentially disrupting established divisions of domestic labor. Through 30 qualitative interviews with 15 heterosexual dual-earning parents, this article explores the extent and nature of changes in respective labor allocations following the transition to home working. The data reveals that both women and men increased their time spent on domestic labor, though typically men's changes were insufficient to overturn pre-existing unequal divisions, and women were more likely to reduce their employment hours to "better" balance caring and housework responsibilities. Men were also likely to see their increased domestic contributions as temporary during these exceptional circumstances with evidence of couples "doing" gender. Where partners did transition toward greater egalitarianism, men were actively taking ownership of new unpaid tasks and adapting their (gendered) familial identities as their work and family roles changed.

Keywords

Domestic division of labor; Pandemic; Working from home

Introduction

The COVID pandemic has brought about unprecedented change in people's lives, with much of the population legally obliged and thereafter encouraged to begin working from home (WFH) in an attempt to minimize the risk of virus exposure. It has long been argued that WFH offers a means to better balance the demands of both paid employment and non-employment endeavors like housework and childcare (Powell & Craig, 2015). However, never before have both partners in dual-earning couples been thrust into this situation involuntarily, that is, without requesting to homework or it being their preferred working arrangement. For parents, there has been the added strain of schools, childcare facilities and leisure activities being closed for a sustained period of time while grandparents (often a key source of informal childcare in the UK) have been isolating and thus unavailable to provide such support. Sevilla and Smith (2020) report that the typical UK family with at least one young child is averaging an additional 40 h of childcare each week, which they have to manage alongside navigating an oft unfamiliar and difficult transition to home-working. This presents an interesting context to explore how families have responded to these changes (and associated challenges) in the way they manage and potentially renegotiate the domestic division of labor.

Existing research is relatively unanimous in how stubborn traditional divisions of domestic labor have been for heteronormative dual-earning couples, with women continuing to undertake the greatest share of housework and childcare, despite sharing the responsibility

for household income (e.g., Kan & Laurie, 2016). This has proven to be the case when changes at household level affect long-standing routines, even male job loss (Garcia & Tomlinson, 2021) through to wider structural changes; for example, the previous economic crisis of 2008 did not stimulate a marked or consistent trend toward egalitarianism (Rubery & Rafferty, 2013). While we may therefore assume that a similar pattern will emerge in the context of the COVID pandemic, there are instances where couples do not always “carry on as usual” when working roles are in flux and space is created to challenge and renegotiate roles within the domestic sphere (Gush et al., 2015). Indeed, in instances where both dual-earning partners are involuntarily present at home each day, the capacity for them to share domestic labor is greatly increased as the spatial organization of work converges. What may often be “invisible” labor becomes harder to ignore and, theoretically, opt out of, when one's temporary office also serves as a virtual classroom and child's play space (Collins et al., 2021).

This article has three principal aims: firstly, to identify whether the involuntary transition to WFH of both heterosexual parents in a household stimulates a renegotiation of the domestic division of labor. Secondly, to understand the key factors influencing any moves toward egalitarianism in these divisions, or that contributed to a maintenance of the status quo. In doing so, the prevalence of theoretical explanations for the division of domestic labor (DDOL) such as relative resource bargaining, and how these play out practically, are considered in this unique context. Finally, to explore how change, or resistance to change, is practically accomplished by couples as they adapt to changes in their working and caring routines. As principal responsibility for domestic labor continues to be one of the primary ways in which people's lives are organized, with implications for one's social and economic dependence over the life course (Hochschild, 1989), the opportunity to explore possible instances of change and resistance offers a fruitful avenue for research.

Covid and the domestic division of labor

In the context of the COVID pandemic, we can already glean initial indications of how the DDOL has been affected in the international arena. In Iceland, women continue to undertake a higher share of household labor plus additional emotional labor to support family members during the pandemic (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). In Australia, Craig and Churchill (2021) found that time spent on unpaid labor was significantly higher for both dual-earning women and men, however, despite men increasing their time spent on childcare, this overall trend in unpaid labor was more pronounced for mothers. Expectations of increased father involvement were largely not realized in Hennekam and Shymko's (2020) study in France, with mothers of young children in the US found to be four to five times more likely to reduce their paid working hours than fathers were (Collins et al., 2021).

It is a similar story in the UK, where both parents have increased their DDOL but mothers are more likely to combine their paid work with household responsibilities, and are thus much more likely to have paid work interrupted by such responsibilities (Andrew et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2020). Orefice and Quintana-Domeque (2020) find that during the pandemic women are spending 3.5 h more on childcare and home schooling per week than men, and 9.2 weekly

hours more on housework (e.g., cooking, cleaning, and laundry), both of which represent an increase in the female-male gap in time spent on each pre-COVID. Findings are more mixed in Sevilla and Smith's (2020) study where this gender gap in childcare has slightly narrowed since the first national lockdown began in March 2020; albeit more so when men have been furloughed or made redundant rather than WFH. As such, preliminary evidence suggests that the pandemic is reinforcing unequal divisions of housework and childcare, rather than acting as a catalyst for movement toward egalitarianism in the DDOL.

The division of labor among dual-earning couples working from home

Much of the research examining the experiences of those WFH focuses on the effect this working arrangement has on their work-life balance (e.g., Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Tietze et al., 2006). There is a tendency toward exploring satisfaction with this balance, thus with implications for intra-couple differences in time spent on domestic labor, but rarely how shares (and any changes) are negotiated. Where literature has considered the effects of WFH on gender roles and the DDOL it has typically found that women have been most likely to make use of this flexible working arrangement, in such cases there is an entrenchment of traditional divisions of housework and care, and thus WFH has ultimately not undermined the fundamentally gendered nature of work and family roles (e.g., Sullivan & Lewis, 2001; Sullivan & Smithson, 2007; Wheatley, 2012). However, space may be created to challenge gender norms when it is men who switch to home-working (Osnowitz, 2005) albeit with the additional support from their female partners “the ghost at the banquet” (Marsh & Musson, 2008). Further, while fathers of young children who work from home are more involved in childcare, this is often positioned as “additional” or “extra” to the care already provided by mothers, with the traditional DDOL remaining relatively intact (Halford, 2006).

While there are a number of purported benefits of WFH, not least the ability of parents to maintain their work capabilities and thus careers in times of increased familial demands (Chung & van der Horst, 2017), findings actually tend to be rather inconclusive. For example, there is evidence of work-home and home-work spillover that is, of both work and home activities being interrupted by the demands of the other (Delanoëijie et al., 2019) and work intensification (e.g., Bathini & Kandathil, 2019), which is linked to stress, burnout, and unfavorable impacts on psychological well-being (Burchell, 2002). It is entirely feasible that this will be particularly acute with the added anxiety caused by the pandemic and increased domestic labor demands. Again, there is the potential here for greater emotional labor from households' primary carers – usually women – but also for sharing when both partners are WFH.

Research on the effects of WFH tends to be based on data reported by one partner, typically the partner WFH (e.g., Halford, 2006; Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Marsh & Musson, 2008; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001) and there is variance in temporal forms (i.e., individuals studied who worked partly or mainly from home, not just those who did so exclusively). Further, much research does not indicate the employment status of partners, with only one study (Collins et al., 2021)

incorporating cases where both partners are WFH – this an analysis of US panel data. Consequently, the originality of this research stems from both the context: where both partners are simultaneously WFH involuntarily, and the methodology: gaining the perspective of both partners via qualitative interviews.

Allocating shares of domestic labor

Early attempts to explain the DDOL conceptualize households as rational (economic) decision-making units where members specialize in either domestic or market-orientated roles, which gave rise to a sexual division of paid and unpaid labor (Becker, 1991; Parsons & Bales, 1956). As the context has changed, not least women generally outperforming men in terms of educational attainment, changes in familial composition and both the need or desirability for two incomes, notions of household specialization have been questioned (Williams, 2004). This perspective also ignores the potential for interpersonal preferences such as selfish or altruistic behavior and power dynamics within couples, which are held more central in notions of relative resource bargaining.

The premise of the bargaining approach is that partners in possession of the greatest resources (often measured in terms of earnings, paid working hours, or human capital) can manufacture a reduced share of unpaid labor for themselves (Crompton, 2006). As men historically had the longest employment hours and higher earnings – the latter aided more recently by occupational segregation and a continuing lower share of housework and childcare – this justification has been offered for traditional, unequal divisions of domestic labor (e.g., Lyonette & Crompton, 2014; Van Der Lippe et al., 2017). However, bargaining is often assumed rather than observed (Livingston, 2014), with relative resources such as paid working hours or earnings taken as a proxy for the “best deal one can get” (Thébaud, 2010: 332). As such, we do not have a clear understanding of how bargaining actually unfolds, such as whether partners strike explicit verbal agreements (Carlson & Hans, 2020). While resources such as actual and potential earnings, and time availability to engage in domestic labor clearly influence the DDOL, it cannot simply be a trade-off between the two as research finds many instances whereby women with the greatest earnings and/or paid employment hours continue to undertake a greater share of domestic labor (e.g., Legerski & Cornwall, 2010; Lindsay & Maher, 2014).

In effect, relative resources are laden with gendered (as they are simultaneously with racial and class) meaning, such that greater importance may be attributed to the earnings of whichever household member is considered to have the greatest moral responsibility for the family's economic security (Rao, 2020). As a result, there is often a turn to the gender perspective via notions of couples “doing” gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). People are found to behave in ways that do not compromise their accountability to others as competent social actors, and as such will not deviate too far from normative gendered expectations (Duncan et al., 2003). The initial indications from the COVID-related research mentioned above point to the continuing pervasiveness of these norms, which are not automatically challenged by one partner being made redundant, furloughed or WFH. Nevertheless, with

both partners home-working, the scope for greater male involvement in housework and childcare has increased, so too the opportunity to learn more about negotiations of the DDOL during this period of potential flux.

Methods

Utilizing gatekeepers employed in HR positions across a number of public and private sector organizations, and snowball sampling to further enhance reach to potential participants, 25 couples were identified as meeting the following criteria for inclusion in the study. Namely, that they were heterosexual, co-habiting parents with at least one child under the age of 10. Secondly, that both parents worked full-time prior to the first UK national lockdown (March 23, 2020 to April 20, 2020) and whose occupations facilitated them WFH with 30+ weekly working hours between the first lockdown period and the interviews, which were conducted in June and July 2020. Each respondent had not worked from home previously during their current employment, nor had requested to do so at any time. Only the parents (interviewed) and their children were present in households during the period studied with no available support due to strict social distancing measures. This ensured a sample that, on the one hand were accustomed to managing the conflicting demands of long employment hours and unpaid labor, but were experiencing a period of change where established paid and unpaid labor routines were unsettled. Of those contacted, 15 couples agreed to take part. Although there was no selection criteria based on location or educational attainment, all respondents live in the counties of Yorkshire, Northumberland, and Lancashire (Northern England) and all had qualifications to at least Further Education level. Twelve of the couples identify as White British, there is one British couple of South Asian descent, and two couples with one partner who is mixed race (one of Black Caribbean and one of Black African heritage).

Interviews were conducted with each partner individually so that they could speak openly about the DDOL and their experiences of allocating tasks. The total number of interviews conducted were therefore 30, each lasting between 50 and 80 min. They took place virtually via the software program Zoom using the video function and were recorded for manual transcription. Prior to these interviews, each couple collectively completed background information and self-reported times spent on paid employment and domestic labor; both pre-COVID and after making the transition to WFH (see Table 1). These were returned via email, with the information confirmed at interview to ensure that there was intra-couple consensus on these self-reported figures. Due to the difficulties in conceptualizing time spent “on” paid employment (from commute times to average discretionary overtime, particularly unpaid) the information presented is purely individuals' contracted hours. Interview quotes in the next section illustrate that the requirement for more, or less, discretionary overtime after the national lockdown differed across cases.

The interviews were relatively unstructured, utilizing an interview guide that adopted the principles of Kvale (2007) consisting of just three topic areas; what the DDOL was (pre-COVID and presently), the process by which these shares were allocated, and the factors they perceive were key to determining the DDOL and this negotiation process. These topic areas

consisted of a maximum of three open-ended questions, with follow-up probes informed by extant literature. For example, the third topic area began with the question “What do you perceive are the main factors influencing your respective shares of paid and unpaid work?” with probes helping to ascertain the extent to which the most common explanations in the literature, such as time availability and earnings capacity, featured in their decision making. This research design enabled the analysis to be led by the emergent qualitative data and then links were drawn to existing theory and empirical data in a cyclical fashion (Tracy, 2013), so that new insights can be integrated into current explanations for the DDOL.

Findings

The impact of involuntary dual-WFH on the domestic division of labor

As illustrated in Table 1, women conducted larger shares of domestic labor pre-COVID in each of the 15 couples. This despite paid employment hours being relatively equal - with 12 couples separated by three hours or fewer difference – resulting in women having the greatest overall time spent on paid and unpaid labor in all cases. Meanwhile, men were the highest earners in 10 cases before the pandemic, as they were at the time of the interviews when both partners were home-working. The transition to both partners WFH brought about themes of continuity and change. The most common occurrence (6 out of the 15 couples) saw both partners increase their time spent on domestic labor, with men increasing their time spent more than their partners during this period – between 1 and 7 hours per week more - yet due to the disproportionate shares pre-COVID, women retained a higher share of domestic labor. As such, there is greater sharing of the additional domestic labor incurred during the COVID pandemic meaning a reduced gap in the difference in time spent on housework and childcare, without these rather traditional DDOL being overturned.

For some, this was viewed as having positive implications for the future, as this greater involvement in housework and (particularly) childcare was perceived to be a potential first step toward greater egalitarianism in some households as men reported greater awareness of how unequal shares have been, and the benefits of this new greater share:

“Being at home more was a bit of a rude awakening for me. At some level of consciousness I knew that Olivia did more around the house than I do. When you actually see how much time and effort goes into making the house presentable, the kids, things that benefit us all, I felt a bit ashamed” (Andrew Ward)

“What stopped me getting more involved in housework and caring was tiredness from work, the feeling that these things are just that – more work – and a lack of confidence. It was easier to not get involved. Now, I'm loving the extra time with the kids, this is not something I want to forgo if things go back to a degree of normality” (Arthur Lee)

Table 1 INSERT HERE

However, there was pessimism among the women in three of these six couples, largely stemming from concerns over their partners increasing apathy toward the pandemic and how any changes in domestic labor were thus perceived to be temporary. In particular, men reported greater anxiety than women in this sample to return to working “normality” (see Rao, 2020), in this case, their standard working arrangement and being back at the office:

“As time has gone on he's started suffering from what you might call 'lockdown fatigue', saying things need to go back to normal now as this has been going on for too long. Normal in this house is me doing most of the cleaning, cooking, and whatnot” (Sarah Bailey)

“It feels like he sees this as him doing his bit, as though he's supporting me during the pandemic because I'm more worried about it than he is...he's more worried about going back to work” (Melanie Clark)

Across the interviews, the additional domestic labor undertaken by men since the pandemic began were typically given greater emphasis in the interviews than their partners were, signaling the different gendered expectations around domestic labor involvement. Even where the DDOL was spoken about in favorable terms, accounts revealed that ensuring a relatively equitable DDOL often itself encompassed a degree of “work” not always captured in the self-reported data offered in Table 1 as schedules were disrupted:

“We are pretty organized to be fair. I am the kind of person who likes to know exactly what is happening, on which day. I draw up rotas, scribble on calendars, everything. As of Sunday night we all know who is in charge of homework on Tuesday, dinner on Friday, bath time at the weekend” (Laura Smyth)

The second most common response to WFH was for women's paid employment hours to have been reduced (three women voluntarily, two imposed by their employer) and a further entrenchment of their already greater shares of domestic labor. There are just two couples where a genuine shift toward egalitarianism occurred – the Wilks and Hall households. Interestingly, these represent two of three cases where male employment hours were reduced, with two imposed by the employer (Wilks and Wilson) and John Hall the only father to request a reduction in employment hours. The Wilson case demonstrates that a reduction in male paid working hours does not necessitate a renegotiation of the DDOL as Rachel Wilson increased her time spent on domestic labor more than Matt despite his reduction in paid employment hours. Finally, there were two couples whose paid employment hours and earnings remained the same and the women increased their time spent on domestic labor when WFH the most, again reaffirming an already unequal DDOL.

Across the sample, the division of particular domestic tasks undertaken by women and men were surprisingly uniform, albeit in line with research findings elsewhere (e.g., Andrew et al., 2020). Principally, increases in men's domestic labor centered around activities that were less time specific than others, such as vacuuming and food shopping, or those that did not impinge on core paid working hours. This included activities such as overseeing bath time, play time and storytelling in the evenings, or at times congruent with their jobs:

“His time with the kids involves sticking an iPad in their hands and carrying on his work until they get bored or become too distracting. But he will also tag himself in when he has more mundane work to be getting on with such as catching up with emails, and often when supervising play time – “supervising” being used loosely here” (Amelia Brown)

Effectively, activities that were required during typical employment hours and thus interrupted paid work (such as helping with schooling or cooking) were largely done by the women. Justifications for this general prioritizing of the man's paid employment centered on two primary factors; the first being the perception that employers were more accommodating of women needing to be more flexible during lockdown than they were of men. Secondly, that women were more adept at balancing the two having been accustomed to doing so before the pandemic:

“I've been quite lucky, my bosses have been pretty understanding of the situation for us mothers with schools closed. I don't think Harry's have been to the same extent, even to the point where his line manager seems to expect that time typically spent on the commute is now freed up time for more work” (Andrea Davies)

“I would worry about things not being done, being done wrong, or him imploding because he has never had to work while minding the children before. I think he would be too distracted by work to give the children his full attention, and vice versa, which would just lead to added stress” (Maeve Harris)

The result of this was that women reported elevated levels of anxiety; partly borne out of the situation regarding the pandemic, but often taking on much of the added emotional labor required to ensure that house cleanliness, family members nutrition, their mental health – much of which came under increased pressure during the pandemic – remained to the highest possible levels.

Principal factors affecting a renegotiation of the DDOL (or lack thereof)

Time availability to conduct domestic labor was the key reason cited for an unequal DDOL pre-COVID, even where paid employment hours for both partners were similar. This is testament to the pervasiveness of gender as a theme throughout these findings; for example, while both partners reported struggling with additional discretionary overtime and adjusting to WFH, men were more likely to say that these impinged on their availability to conduct housework and childcare. In essence, women are more likely to organize their work around “home,” whereas men actively work to protect their time from housework (as seen elsewhere e.g., Rao, 2020). Generally, men in this sample were saving more time usually spent commuting to and from work, and it was often these periods (before 8:30 a.m. and after 5 p.m.) that their additional time spent on domestic labor took place. It is therefore unsurprising that the two cases where the DDOL was markedly renegotiated represent cases of reduced male employment hours:

“It was pretty straight-forward really. My employer kept us all on to avoid anyone being furloughed, but we all agreed to take a reduction in hours. Grace is therefore working longer

hours than I am at the moment, so naturally I started to spend time with the kids more and any other jobs that needed doing” (Michael Wilks)

“My hours and therefore pay are both down. We're increasingly reliant on her hours not dropping too so actually there has been a role reversal in many ways as we need her to keep performing well in her job” (John Hall)

While time availability was certainly a resource used to justify DDOL decisions, the data raises a number of questions regarding the extent and nature of bargaining. Typical conceptions of “resources” used for bargaining a reduced share of the DDOL are things that individuals possess which have a perceived market value, that is, educational attainment, paid working hours, and actual or prospective earnings. The underlying assumption is that domestic work is less desirable than paid employment, either because it limits one's economic independence or is rather mundane in nature and thus something to avoid (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). There was certainly evidence of this, for example:

“This might be a bit taboo and of course you adore your kids and will do anything for them, but if you have the option to avoid a certain chore or to do it half-assed - and there won't be any serious consequence – you will. At least some of the time” (Tom Brown)

“I have always been more inclined to work a little later than I am to finish early and get stuck in to housework. I like my job so there's more enjoyment in staying longer than there is mopping, scrubbing, and whatever. Plus, a more tangible reward in terms of the additional money, which benefits the family, so kind-of a win-win” (Harry Davies)

Yet, for Michael Wilks and John Hall, levels of proficiency in childcare and housework became resources they actively worked to develop, to better position themselves for a transition to their desired, renegotiated familial role:

“I wanted to become better at this stuff because it's obviously important, and I could not justify a drop in standards from what everyone is used to, which would itself make it less likely that I got to continue being so actively involved” (Michael Wilks)

As such, what constitutes a “resource” will depend upon one's ultimate goal when bargaining or negotiating. Competence in domestic labor was construed as a resource among the women in this sample, none of whom were looking to fully relinquish their involvement in housework or childcare given that a great deal of life satisfaction was gained when they felt that household members were generally happy, eating healthy meals, and so forth. Conversely, reluctance to develop this resource allowed their partners to justify a markedly unequal DDOL through relative incompetence.

Given these different orientations to undertaking domestic labor there were only three instances of overt bargaining in its conventional form, all by men. As two illustrations:

“I don't think that it's unreasonable that Julia does more of the chores if I'm working longer, if anything, it seems to be the fairest way to go about things” (David Evans)

“Mason talks about his long work hours and how reliant we are on his wages whenever I attempt to discuss the housework situation. I point out that my overall time spent on work

and things around the house is actually more than his, but he thinks we can afford to drop a few hours of housework but can't when it comes to his job” (Laura Smyth)

Much more common across this sample, and in contrast to conventional bargaining wisdom, is that partners with the lowest employment hours or earnings (i.e., the fewest relative resources) actually led DDOL negotiations. This was not borne out of a fear of jeopardizing access to their partners greater resources (as has been posited elsewhere, e.g., Dempsey, 2000), not least given that they had access to their own employment and sources of livelihood. Rather, decisions regarding housework and childcare involvement have a gendered, moral dimension (Duncan et al., 2003) and are thus impossible to reduce to a purely economic rationale:

“There is of course an argument that being career focused affords you luxuries the family can benefit from, but we would always weigh up one of us taking on additional hours with the costs of lost family time together as that is more important than a bit of extra money” (Sam Chopra)

As such, while relative resources such as time availability and earnings potential were indeed important in explaining the DDOL in this sample, conventional bargaining was not a prominent nor frequent feature—rather one element in a more holistic negotiation process. There is certainly an individual component to decisions made, with men generally found to be more instrumental and self-orientated as will be discussed, however, much of the decision making was jointly undertaken by both partners with the households short and longer term well-being of chief concern.

Interestingly, gender was not explicitly mentioned by any of the couples as a primary factor and even downplayed by some women and men – who all espoused egalitarian ideals. Thus, WFH offered greater flexibility to aid a transition towards this purportedly desirable state of affairs, and the continued disjuncture between these expressed beliefs and actual behavior was accounted for in a number of (implicitly gendered) ways. Men were more likely to say that they had not considered working flexibly before the pandemic (10 men, in comparison to 4 women out of 15) nor felt it likely that they would continue to work from home in the future (nine compared to five). In the interviews, men reported their wish to appear visibly working hard during standard employment hours, even where attending meetings and so forth directly conflicted with childcare duties:

“I'm used to being closely supervised, so this new-found degree of autonomy comes with a lot of pressure to make sure that I still look busy. For example, I am answering emails much quicker than I normally do. I think this has led to me actually working a bit more each day than before” (Declan Laws)

Women were significantly more likely (six compared to two men) to negotiate an arrangement with their employer that granted them greater autonomy regarding when and how paid work would be completed—often on the proviso that they hit “targets” that were more time flexible. As a result, they made a more concerted effort to stop working at pre-determined finish times, effectively dispensing with discretionary overtime where possible; acknowledging that in the uncertain economic context this potentially put their employment

status at risk. Both women and men revealed that a range of strategies have been adopted to better balance employment and non-employment responsibilities. For example, four women and two men indicated that they had begun drafting emails at night-time, once non-employment duties had been completed, which could then be sent while simultaneously tending to domestic labor the following day.

A final illustration of many men in this sample “doing” gender was the implicit subscription to breadwinning in their reluctance to impinge too much on their paid work (and ultimately their careers) by building upon increased time spent on the DDOL. This, despite their reliance on both incomes:

“I find it hard to explain. I don't see myself as head of the house like previous generations of men might have, and if Olivia lost her job we'd have to downsize considerably. But I do feel this pressure to provide, like this is my family and it's my main purpose in life to make sure they're taken care of” (Andrew Ward)

In several cases their partners reinforced this idea:

“This is anecdotal, but I think men are still dealing with the legacies of masculinity that probably are outdated now. Of course, I don't want to lose my job either, but I think not bringing money into the house is a bigger fear for Harry throughout this pandemic than it is for me” (Andrea Davies)

Other factors influencing whether there was a renegotiation of the DDOL included each individual's occupation, often bound up with the employment hours on offer and whether their sector had been significantly affected by the COVID response; the number and age of their children; the type of abode they lived in. The intersection of such challenges was evident for the Evans' who had two young children – one of school age, and the other of pre-school age in their modest sized apartment:

“Andrew and I share the same dining table to work on with our eldest son who really needs focused attention to do his schoolwork, and our youngest who needs entertaining. It's chaotic, and if we need a quiet space for a meeting we have no choice but to cramp on a stool in front of my dresser table in the bedroom. It's hardwork, it's stressful, and it basically means that we both have to chip in pretty much all day” (Olivia Ward)

In this instance, the result was a greater sharing of the DDOL, which was not always the case:

“All the family sharing the same space has led to many arguments. David isn't used to this as my mum has always been a hands-on grandmother and we made use of after-school clubs and a childminder because both of our jobs are pretty demanding. It's obviously the same for me but he simply thinks I'm better at it, without any real justification” (Julie Evans)

How change in the DDOL was accomplished or resisted

Exploring how change in the DDOL is negotiated or alternatively resisted is important to improve our understanding of how routes to egalitarianism may be realized. Beginning with

the two cases of renegotiation that led to greater egalitarianism, there is a clear correlation between active negotiation: that is, sitting down, discussing options, agreeing (often with compromise) on the best way to proceed, and continually reviewing decisions made, with progressive change in the DDOL:

“It was actually quite stressful to begin with and involved lots and lots of talks where we had to be honest about what we felt comfortable with; what worries us about certain things; what we need from each other; everything really. And this happened for a period of time before it became more of a routine” (John Hall)

While there was evidence of explicit negotiation between other couples, it did not appear as systematic and robust as those described by the Wilks and Hall households. Some cases were characterized by relatively little “sit down” discussion, notably the four instances where female paid employment hours were reduced and they began increasing their already unequal shares of domestic labor:

“We didn't really discuss it, and it's quite hard to account for the change, I just...started doing more. There's so much to do, my hours were reduced, I don't think there was much to say really. We just settled into this new routine, and may have to come together to discuss it if the situation changes again” (Maria Laws)

There was more evidence of assertiveness for change in other cases, led by the women who incurred much of the additional cognitive work involved in organizing additional domestic labor, but also in supporting their partners who began engaging in domestic tasks more frequently than they had previously.

Women reported that consigning their partners to de-prioritizing their careers for the medium-term, once it became apparent that the effects of the COVID pandemic were going to be protracted, was a common cause of breakdown in negotiations:

“I think he enjoyed being at home more and interacting with the kids during the day, but the novelty seems to be wearing off as he is now really concerned about his job and the career implications for putting other things outside of work first” (Hannah Chopra)

Alongside protracted, explicit dialog regarding the DDOL, greater consciousness of how unequal and thus unfair divisions had been pre-COVID was key to the effective renegotiation for the Wilks and Hall households. This was evident in other cases (as demonstrated by the Andrew Ward and Arthur Lee interview quotes in the first findings section), yet whether these will translate into long-term changes is unclear as two other parts of this process appear integral to facilitating change. Firstly, the requirement for continued application to housework and childcare tasks men had not previously done before. Across the sample, men were positioning their added domestic labor as temporary or framed it as “helping” or “additional” to the labor undertaken by their partners. This was evident in a number of ways, for example:

“The mere fact that I have to ask for him to do something suggests that it's my job. Therefore it'll get done, but it's usually seen as a one-off event, that he's done me a favor” (Rachel Wilson)

“He has this habit of saying ‘right put your feet up now, let me take care of this or that’. As though only when it reaches a certain point can the sharing of chores begin, rather than a fairer share be the starting point” (Andrea Davies)

In such cases, men are extremely unlikely to become as competent and proficient at the new tasks undertaken as their partners are. This played a significant role in notions of perceived incompetence, which were a common justification for a lack of change in the DDOL:

“I’m simply just not as good at this stuff and the family suffers when I do them. It is best I stick to things I can do, and these things just ain’t it” (George Harris)

Continued application to “new” tasks and a desire to do them to one's best ability was key to the next part of this renegotiation process, namely taking ownership of domestic tasks rather than considering them gestures of temporary help. A combination of the consciousness referenced above and continued application to become “better” at them were the main drivers here:

“I didn’t have any burning desire to be a tremendous dishwasher or dryer of laundry, but you realise how much effort your partner has put into it, the benefits members of your family get out of these small things, and you are encouraged to persevere and take a little pride in them. If the standards slip that’s on you, and I wanted to do them well” (Michael Wilks)

Men were also more likely to cite needing time for oneself (four in comparison to one woman) as a justification for not engaging in more domestic labor, demonstrating a more individual and instrumental approach to unpaid work. Women reported that their social engagements, such as lunch with friends, usually involved bringing the children along too. Men adopted a range of tactics to carve time out for themselves:

“I don’t want to say that I just need a break from everyone for an hour because that might look a bit selfish, so I end up lying instead, either that I’ve got extra work to finish or an errand to run. Which in fairness is probably a worse thing to do” (Hugh Webb)

Women were combatting such resistance to a more equal sharing of domestic labor through their own tactics of resistance. For example, Maeve Harris and Julia Evans both cited deliberately not picking up items at the supermarket that were needed, in order so that they could be excused from other chores by venturing out to acquire them at a later time – and often at a slow pace. Laura Smyth and Amelia Brown admitted to effectively forcing their partners into occasional domestic labor. Strategies included purposely arranging work meetings at times when children needed care, and thus their partners had to accommodate their own work around this, through to consciously not washing their partners’ garments so that they would have to themselves. Likewise, Hannah Chopra took up jogging primarily to justify taking time away from domestic labor, with any improvement in physical health considered a bonus.

Ultimately, the data points to the unlikelihood of a change in male familial (and thus gendered) identity without continued application to new domestic tasks that results in them taking responsibility for such tasks. This appears more plausible when male employment hours are reduced; an unequal DDOL is made visible by being present at home more; there is

explicit, verbal negotiation between partners; and men positively experience this more-involved fatherhood. The intersection of these different determining factors may seem like a tall order, but identifying the different stages in moves toward egalitarianism is an important step in reducing inequality inside the home.

Conclusion

The COVID pandemic has changed people's lives considerably, potentially in ways that spark a “new normal” in how work and familial commitments are organized. Studying dual-earning couples where both partners began involuntarily WFH, with an increased childcare burden as schools and childcare facilities were closed during much of this period, presents an intriguing context to explore whether, and how, the DDOL has changed.

To begin with, the data provides more evidence that women in dual-earning couples continue to have primary responsibility for domestic labor, certainly before the move to both partners WFH, but in most cases after the lockdown period too. Dual-WFH had varying effects on the DDOL: the most common response was for men to increase their share of particularly childcare, and housework to a lesser extent, but not to a degree that overturned these already disproportionate shares (supporting emerging findings elsewhere e.g., Craig & Churchill, 2021; Sevilla & Smith, 2020). Further, concerns were expressed by women in this study that these changes may be temporary, with men prone to using language that positioned this additional domestic labor as “helping” their partner rather than taking responsibility for these tasks.

The next key finding from this data is that both partners transitioning to home-working led to a marked egalitarian shift in the DDOL for just 2 out of the 15 couples. Significantly, in both cases the father's paid employment hours had been reduced, which appears to be a critical influence on significant DDOL change – although egalitarianism does not automatically follow from a reduction in men's paid work time. Women were more likely to voluntarily reduce their employment hours to manage domestic labor. Accounts reveal that four elements of their renegotiation were centrally important: a recognition that the prior or existing DDOL is unequal; explicit, verbal discussion of how shares are being allocated as an ongoing process; continued application to “new” domestic tasks undertaken in order to improve competence at them; and taking ownership of these new tasks. Without these components, for example, not sustaining dialog or viewing additional tasks as “help,” a transition toward egalitarianism in the DDOL appears unlikely. Equally, male resistance tended to be relatively passive (Deutsch, 1999) such as perceived incompetence, viewing requests for greater involvement in domestic labor as one-off gestures of goodwill, and so forth. There were varying degrees of assertiveness to combat these tactics, with some women seeking to avoid confrontation in what was perceptibly a period of heightened stress already, through to deliberate ploys to carve out time for oneself.

There are a number of theoretical contributions. To begin with, while the resources of time availability and earnings capacity were cited as key determinants of the DDOL, typically they were not bargained in the conventional way positioned in existing research. Rather than the

partner with the greatest resources using their position of relative power to bargain a lower share of domestic labor (e.g., Thébaud, 2010), couples were more likely to use such resources as the basis to make joint and individual decisions that they perceived to be in the best interests of the household (as found in Garcia & Tomlinson, 2021). For this sample, none of the prominent theoretical explanations for the DDOL – the bargaining, household specialization, or gender perspectives were able to comprehensively account for respective allocations. Rather, they represent features of a wider negotiation process with their influence on the DDOL differing across couples.

This wider negotiation process involved some limited evidence of bargaining, often (again contrary to conventional bargaining wisdom) led by the partner with the fewest employment hours and/or earnings who wished to provide for their families via domestic labor instead. Likewise, we can see evidence of the specialization and gender perspectives intersecting when couples undertake an unequal DDOL based on perceptions that the male partner is less adept at household chores and caring. By exploring how divisions are allocated practically, the range of tactics adopted to resist change, ways in which the resistance was itself resisted, and how in some cases both women and men reverted to a traditional DDOL when faced with uncertainty were all illuminated as part of this negotiation process too. Acknowledging the sample size of this study, the insights point to the need for more large-scale qualitative research examining how negotiations regarding domestic labor practically unfold to fully understand these processes. They hold the key to greater egalitarianism both in the home, and simultaneously outside of it too.

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