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FINALLY, WE COULD HAVE SLOWER MORNINGS AND PROPER BREAKFASTS!: MAPPING PARENTING EXPERIENCE DURING PANDEMIC-ENFORCED LOCKDOWN IN POLAND

Abstract. The aim of this study was to explore and indicate key moments in the experience of the Polish mothers who are caregivers and worked professionally during a national COVID-related lockdown between March and May 2020.

This is a mixed-methods study. The main data was collected by an online survey (n=153) run between 14 and 30 May 2020 asking parents about the most challenging and the most positive moments they experienced during a homestay with their children. The responses were coded thematically. Additionally, five in-depth interviews with HR Business Partners in multinational companies have been conducted.

As a result, the list of “positive” and “challenging” moments has been established identifying challenging areas such as: organizing daily routines, especially meals for all family members, and self-perception of being neither a “good enough” parent nor a productive employee. The positive discoveries about this unusual reality included seeing the national lockdown as an opportunity for a “slower pace of living”, strengthening family bonds, and experiencing the children’s independence in daily routines.

In conclusion, the findings emphasise the importance of enabling flexibility to employees in giving the flexibility to decide on and organise his work schedule and priorities, expectations setting, and defining the desired outcome of work with a supervisor including clear communication about the expected level of availability and visibility in front of the computer.

Keywords: employee experience, quality of working life, employee wellbeing, working from home, work-life balance, COVID-crisis.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Setting the stage: Social household chaos in times of pandemic

The global pandemic was a game changer in how companies think about remote work and employee wellbeing. The consequences of working from home in general have been discussed since the mid-1980s in the context of the quality of working life concept (Shamir, Salomon 1985), developed into the direction of treating employee wellness as workplace innovation (Oeij et al. 2017). However, no one could have expected the disruptive pace of changes in employee workstyles introduced by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated the merger – if not acquisition – of personal and professional lives, assuming novel roles, and transforming the narrative behind remote work.

One of the groups of employees whose fragility has become exposed by work from home are the employees who must simultaneously work and care for children (Report 2020). The most recent comments about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the workplace confirms the tendency to treat “parenting” as a potential moderating factor (Kniffin et al. 2020). The gendered disproportionality of the impact of pandemic experience is widely discussed in the global context by woman’s non-governmental organisations (e.g. Henry 2020) and global institutions such as the World Health Organisation which dedicated on its website a separate section to “Healthy Parenting”. Ovaska (2020) emphasises the unexpected challenges that stem from simultaneously acting as a stay-at-home parent and a work-from-home employee, along with new stressors that emerged in the context of the pandemic (Hiraoka, Tomoda 2020; Kubb, Foran 2020) which also becomes a leading narrative in the lifestyle media stating that during the coronavirus women are working on the “double-shift”, and are sensitive to the burnout (Stewart 2020).

The situational pressure may be described as follows: “the fundamentals of parenting are getting challenged but it has been even more magnified during the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic” (Karki et al. 2020: 957). Additionally, the social expectations of exposing positive parenting are visible to shape and maintain children’s developmental trajectories in the area of mental and physical wellbeing, even (or even more attentively) during isolation at home.

This is a situation of a “role strain”, defined by W.J. Goode (1960) as “the felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations” (1960: 483), which refers to expectations towards the parent her/himself. Abidin (1992) remarks on the mismatch between the aspirations to fulfill the parenting role and resources given in a situational context. Various research (Khodabakhshi-Koolae, Malekabadi 2020) relates the context of such a situation to an “emergency”, with no clarity about an end of the situation, an “abnormal lifestyle”. To quote the opening statement by Spinelli et al. (2020: 2), “parents had been left alone to manage homeschooling and childcare in unprecedented ways”.

In turn, Quah (2020) frames the gender aspect as “Wrestling with Role Strain in a Pandemic” – as the title of her article reads – as she embeds the concept in a traditional division of roles and labour expected, if not dictated by a perception of family and cultural values. A mother is both: the parent and the spouse and share responsibility for “preventive health behaviour”, taking care of children, household works and other aspects of the “home’s physical environment, hygiene and living arrangements” (Quah 2020: 240) in a dominant manner, while the father’s role is seen as a supportive one.

Finally, the emerging lockdown routines and limited access to caregivers provide new tensions in the family ecosystem and shape “a particularly stressful experience” (Uzun et al. 2020: 9). Apart from other sources of stress such as financial insecurity, infobesity, and livelihood uncertainty – which may result in anxiety and lower productivity – there are parental concerns linked to family (parent-children) relations. The latter results from parental behaviours in new situations that require disciplining children and other behaviours that help to meet situational demands. Additional sources of stress associated with quarantine are depression, irritability, and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (Spinelli et al. 2020).

2. Theory/calculation

2.1. Experience that matters and sources of “new stressors”

The objective of our study is to map parents’ experiences of situations that blend work and life situation and to discuss their practical implications for the future when another lockdown enforces new ways of juggling between personal, family, and professional routines. The timing of the research is crucial as we gathered all responses in two last weeks of May 2020, so right before the governmental decision to allow people to return to offices, when memories of lockdown were still fresh and allowed no time for a reflection on or idealisation of the “parenting under pandemic” experience.

When we search for articles that refer to parenting, parenting stress, and the lockdown, we find more than 2 425 records in EBSCO database. As the announcement of global pandemic by the WHO happened on 30 January 2020, our literature review logically refers to year 2020. During our query, we found a kaleidoscope of assumptions that discuss the category of “new stressors”, which informs our reflection on workplace innovation theories (Oeij et al. 2017). In this context, we focus on the practical situations that introduce the perception of newness: new challenges that demand new reactions.

The discussion about “new stressors” and perceived distress of the parenting experience during isolation is summarised by Burke et al. (2020) whose study shows findings from a national survey in Ireland, authorised by the Irish government. The scope of the mentioned research and its cultural similarities to the family situation in Polish culture make it a significant point of reference for us to make assumptions and comparisons about the experience of parents. Burke et al.’s study

(2020) emphasises that parents who experienced lockdown show elevated levels of perceived depression, anxiety, and stress compared to the time before lockdown. Secondly, child carers' frequently identified stressors refer to the capacity to ensure a safe physical environment, for example avoiding crowded spaces or not attending social meetings (Burke et al. 2020).

2.2. Researching moments that matter

This study employs a mixed-methods research approach mapping two different perspectives: working mothers and employers.

To map the perspective of working mothers we used a survey launched in cooperation with MamoPracuj – a Polish portal and community of working mothers. The survey included qualitative elements: open questions about experiences that offer an opportunity for thematic analysis. The respondent's profile e was a woman around 37-years-old, working in a multinational enterprise, a mother of two, which aligns with the user persona of MamoPracuj.pl profile.

Furthermore, we conducted five in-depth interviews with HR professionals responsible for wellbeing policies in their companies, which enriched our discussion and covered employers' viewpoint.

Using the experience journey approach and Moments That Matter concept (Heath, Heath 2017), we sought to explore the following research questions:

- What was the most challenging experience of parents working from home during social isolation?
- What was the most unexpected positive discovery of “parenting in the time of the COVID-19 crisis?”
- What are the solutions that could improve the quality of work for employees that care of their children when working from home?

Table 1. Experience mapping

Experience mapping	
An online survey in cooperation with MamoPracuj.pl portal – the community of the working mom also acting as a job board (n=153). Link: https://mamopracuj.pl/	Five in-depth interviews with HR professionals from a corporate environment were recruited voluntarily to share their experiences about the topic.
<i>Profile of the respondents:</i> Participants of the Mamo Pracuj community, moms who are interested in professional opportunities and development.	<i>Profile of the interviewees:</i> Independent professionals: HR Managers, HR Business Partners who were working remotely during the first lockdown in Poland and were responsible for planning strategies of adaptation and working on solutions that support quality of working life.
14–30 May 2020	14–30 May 2020

Source: authors' own figure.

3. Results

3.1. Findings, Part 1: Key employee experience of working parents during the COVID-19 crisis

We asked survey participants to share their best and worst experiences to identify the moments that mattered most (Morgan 2017) and made the strongest impact on employee experience. The responses were coded thematically in line with Saldaña's (2016) procedure of qualitative coding.

3.1.1. Identified challenging experiences

Firstly, by most of the respondents the lockdown was assessed as an energy-draining experience: "This whole experience was like an emotional roller coaster all the time".

We use it as an opening statement to discuss three main categories of research findings.

"How can you work when kids are demanding lunch"

The first identified challenge was about the general ability to organise the daily schedule, and enable a comfortable space for each family member: "[w]e have two children of different age. It was hard to synchronise everyone's needs".

Respondents mentioned a visible clash between their willingness to provide good care of children and simultaneous mindful presence at work. The frequently mentioned point was about coping with meals in the different daily agendas (various lunch break times) and generally, the need to prepare and serve lunch. Some mothers explained they had to pre-cook every meal in the morning and some mentioned that they stopped working for a couple of hours in the middle of the working hours to deal with lunch preparation and serving. Nevertheless, the tactics taken, both groups described it as an energy-draining event.

The above agrees with findings from Ovaska's research (2020) that parents are aware they will be unable to dedicate a full day to work and a full day to taking care of their children. The emotional tension stemming from the distribution of energy between work and life emerged also from our research. Furthermore, there was no clarity about how long the situation will continue which may only decrease the level of perceived productivity

"Children won't go on their own for long. They need attentive presence, but they were left alone"

The second category of findings includes "good enough" parenting, especially the quality of time spent with children. The new situations to be explained to a child appeared, for example: "it was not easy to explain to the kids the fact that mum

and dad are at home but can't play with them" or "[...] when bored, the children were entering the room and distracted me and other participants. It was impossible to focus".

As presented by Uzun et al. (2020), the isolation periods are treated as a crisis situation, and interactions and closeness between parents and children is even more important than in times without non-standard disturbances, which is even more accurate when we talk about preschool children for whom the abstract notions like COVID-19, pandemic, or social isolation are meaningless (Uzun et al. 2020). Our respondents were feeling the emotional need to be close to their children while talking about not being able to be fully present. They often blamed themselves for not being able to find high-quality (creative) solutions to prevent children from prolonged TV or video game sessions. Overload of technology was indicated as one of the greatest challenges as "it was hard to track and limit the time a TV-time even before the pandemic".

"After work, it was time for homework, so as parents we were on the run all the time"

The third category of findings refers to home-schooling and organising and ensuring support in online education. The respondents talk about a space without a formal or even symbolic "end of a business day" moment. Some parents of schoolers mentioned that the end of online classes was just a beginning of intensive presence of children and moving around the house and the moments of doing homework, usually with support from their parents side. Moreover, a high number of mothers explained that they felt obliged to catch up with the workload that has been neglected in the afternoon due to the household responsibilities. One says: "[t]here was neither 'me-time' nor 'me-space'", while other claims that "[i]t was like an 'everybody's space' all the time".

In summary, this reality was described as a space with constant disruption. Dealing with attention distractors such as children's visible presence in the work space or general background noises and other distractors related to parental responsibilities created an experience of never-ending buzz with blurred lines between the spheres of lives and time for battery charging: "[I] was simply exhausted in the evening. With no space for regeneration".

3.1.2. Unexpected positive discoveries

In the second part of the online survey, we asked about the positive aspects of the situation. Ten respondents out of 153 declared that there is nothing positive about this experience.

"I thought that it is impossible to work fully remotely"

The most frequently identified positive mentions referred to the experience of working from home that has been proven to be "possible" and "effective" and even

has its benefits such as saving time of daily commute to work or “slower pace of life” illustrated by quotations such as: “[m]ornings at a slow pace, no rush, better bonding with kids”.

Some respondents also mentioned improvements in healthy eating habits or fitness workouts at home. In both parts of our interview – talking about positive and negative experiences – the element that offers new experiences refers to meal preparation and providing healthy meals for all family members.

“I didn’t expect my children to be so mature and independent”

Furthermore, realising how well and fast children adapted to the new roles, and that they are independent enough to deal with parents’ close assistance was also a visible finding and a source of unexpected discoveries: “I was amazed how my four-year-old son understood this situation” – as one of the mothers says.

To sum up the findings from thematic analysis and differentiate the level of saturation of each thematic category, we offer the detailed code structure in Table 2.

Table 2. The primary and main themes extracted from responses to open questions

Primary categories	Number of mentions (out of 153)	Main themes
1	2	3
Negative experiences		
Organising the day and taking care of children	120	Typical caregiving routines Spending time with children High quality time Feeling of guilt, “not enough” parenting Meals (21) Supporting children in online schooling and helping with homework (49)
Balancing the roles of parent and employee	80	Work-life balance Combining the roles of an employee and a parent
Perceived productivity	34	Difficulties with focusing on work Constant interruptions during work Difficulties in designing time for efficient work General chaos, sounds in the background Catching up on work in evenings and nights

Table 2. (cont.)

1	2	3
Positive experiences		
Family relations	60	Relations between children and parent(s) Relations with children, family relations, spending more time with their children
Work from home is possible and has its benefits	64	Discovery that remote work is possible in 100% “Slower day” (more attention to some routines such as breakfast, healthy eating, and sleeping habits) End of “always in a hurry” routines Saving the time for commuting
The way children were dealing with the situation	28	The way children reacted and adapted

Source: authors' own figure.

Moreover, the responses to the ranking questions of our online survey allowed us to identify the key directions for creating space designed for the better working experience of parents. Below you can find the top three themes that were ranked the highest (top three multiple answers were possible):

- flexible work (74.3%);
- remote work (48%) and office location without the necessity of a long commute (38%);
- solutions related to accessible childcare (45.4%), which also shows that flexible work solutions are of a vital importance to the company architecture.

3.2. Findings, Part 2: Key findings of in-depth interviews, sharing employer experience of during the COVID-19 crisis

At the same time, we were running the survey and exploring the key moment for moms that work professionally, we wanted to enrich our findings and asked the representatives of employers to share the challenges and positive moments of this enforced reality.

The five in-depth interviews with corporate HR professionals were conducted to find their perspectives on parenting during the pandemic lockdown. We selected HR Business Partners from among organizations that proactively shared practices with other companies. The key findings included:

Table 3. Employers' perspective regarding their initiatives dedicated to support the employees who are caregivers

Theme	Illustrative quote(s)
Overwhelming uncertainty	“Nobody knew what to do”.
Availability of parental leave on demand	“The parenting leave was available, but most of the parents didn't take this opportunity”.
	“Maybe they took care of everything or they were afraid of using this option”.
Visible absence of some employees	“We were trying to be flexible and enable work also in the evenings and without full presence during online meetings”.
Initiatives and actions to support parents in fitting parenting routines into daily work.	<p>“We were trying to launch new activities like lessons of programming for children or other online interactions, but we gave up as children were sitting in front of the computer too long”.</p> <p>“We set closed groups where parents could exchange ideas on how to engage children, with interesting resources”.</p> <p>“We made unused computers available to our employees and even organized a very well-received real-time online animation with manual arts and crafts”.</p>

Source: authors' own elaboration.

In summary, we see that the lockdown was a moment of self-organizing for parents, while they expected employers to show empathy and understanding of their lower or different visibility than that of their colleagues without children. First and foremost, parents expected their employers to give meaning to their productivity in a new work-from-home setting. The culture of flexibility, understanding of workstyle, and key experiences were more important than formal initiatives and their credibility is higher when they go hand in hand with tangible support.

The category mentioned by the interviewees with a high level of saturation was linked to community-building and community-centered communication. None of the in-depth interview participants explained it as a great success story delivered. We find a “community building” perspective promising with the recommendation to bond communities through impactful sense-giving initiatives (coaching sessions, psychological support, and intervention groups) instead of mood-boosting initiatives (for example online cooking sessions or Banana Bread Day).

In the moment of interviewing, none of the HR Business Partners saw the lockdown as a crisis that may ignite ideas of how to improve “Quality of Working Life” (Oeij et al. 2017) in the company, but rather as “firefighting”-type ad hoc activities.

4. Discussion

4.1. Contribution to the academic discussion about parenting in times of national lockdowns

From the employee perspective, our research confirmed the importance of three thematic categories in the discussion about the experience of parents that are taking care of their children while working professionally from home. These are the following topics: preparing family meals, attentive parenting, and organizing daily routines.

Food-related themes that were most commonly mentioned can be interpreted in the context of concerns about healthy living and eating habits mentioned by various researchers, for example “a fear of child’s weight gaining due to a sedentary lifestyle” (Khodabakhshi-Koolaee, Malekabadi 2020).

“The quality of engagement and parents” mindful presence and involvement in an activity was mentioned frequently among respondents, which can be referred to as the “good-enough parenting” concept that appears in other studies (Fletcher 2020). The theme of quality time spending norms (like watching too much television or playing video games due to the lack of other activities) was also mentioned as a reflection that causes distress (Sahithya et al. 2020). This category is also being discussed in the frameworks of the mental well-being of parents and children.

Similar to our findings appear also in Thompson’s study writes in the “added complexity at home” (2020: 2) and “turning everyone’s lives upside down” (2020: 3). In turn, Spinelli uses the term “household chaos” understood as “the organization of home spaces and routines and on the quality of home atmosphere” (Spinelli et al. 2020: 6). Those three categories are impacting the perception of experiences to the highest extent.

Additionally, we would like to also emphasize the category of social roles in a partnership as the pandemic lockdown shed a different light on the opportunity of co-parenting and ways of sharing household responsibilities equally or thinking more about sharing childcare, however, it was not as visible in our findings as in the literature review as a continuous presence at home is discussed by various scholars (Cito et al. 2020), especially in the context of paternity: “[a]s a result, the quarantine has led many fathers to spend much more time at home with their children” (Cito et al. 2020: 251) and may influence the perception of the role of the father in general.

From the perspective of employers, we find emphasis on the importance of enabling flexibility to employees in articles (Hamouche 2020) and we also notice a new space of employee experiences that are more related to resilience building, which will be good both for business and working parents and an importance of a real flexibility exposed in managerial responsibilities through among many other: giving flexibility to decide on and organise his work schedule and priorities or

better and more frequent communication around continuous conversation about work progress and framing expected level of availability and visibility in front of the computer.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Implications for managers and perspective for the future: Drafting a new employee experience journey and putting human enablement technology first

The new stressors and challenging moments demand actions from both sides: parents and employers. After the first, unexpected pandemic wave, employers could have invented scenarios that address the needs of and respond to the workstyle of employees who are parents and who became a significantly visible group in employee segmentation. We may consider the latter element in the context of the fact that women are penalized on the job market for having children while men are praised for having them (Tauke et al. 2016), while women are expected to take most of the responsibility for taking care of children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The meaning of work-life balance unexpectedly changed as notions such as frameworks for working from home, availability, and the role of face time had to be renegotiated. Thus, it was to be expected that the “new stressors” are widely discussed in the COVID-crises related literature from 2020.

The effective future scenarios of employee management should focus on the mapping employee experience in new situational challenges and redesigning the employee satisfaction journey to neutralize challenges and enhance positive experiences of working from home over long periods of time with a low possibility of fixed planning frameworks.

Furthermore, organizational communication and building narratives around parenting at times of national lockdowns can be a sense-making tool in organizations. Negative narratives that emerged in studies with statements such as “I was exhausted”, “No ‘me’ time”, “No time for regeneration” suggest a need to reframe the discussion from “exhaustion” to “excitement”, which can be facilitated through the continuous communication in organizations and presentation of work from home with children as a desired element of company’s culture.

Moreover, the potential directions should consider an adaptive approach at both the instrumental level (online attractions for children, training for healthy work-from-home habits, working tools such as headphones for employees) and in more organizational culture-related solutions such as empathy for diverse workstyles (human-centered design), more advanced employee segmentation by workstyle as the main criterion of differentiation, and general approach to the culture of improvisation and strategizing instead of strict planning and commitments.

A significant stress neutralizer at the instrumental and organizational levels is technology. In the instrumental area, technology is linked to good equipment and support provided by the employer to employees (Hamouche 2020: 8). Going even a step further, this matter encroaches upon the opportunities offered by HR Tech such as a family benefits platform like Cleo (<https://hicleo.com/>) or the rising category of Parenting App (PR Newswire 2020).

Moreover, the development of parenting coaching and tech tools makes the most of their time with children, while the support of parents-children interactions fosters high-quality engagement with apps for families and children. These apps are full of activities with data tracking and quizzes such as memory games that mindfully facilitate the process of a child's development and organize engaging everyday routines in the pandemic new normal.

We found that "quick wins" such as providing employees with computer equipment like cameras and headphones were appreciated. In some cases, we see that overcommunication about well-being and global webinars could have been burdensome and unnecessary to such a high extent. The element of technological solutions can be prognostic in the discussion about the social construction of technology as a reflective way to reconstruct employee experiences in a virtual working environment, which can be treated as a reflective long-term solution.

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WRESZCIE MOŻEMY MIEĆ WOLNIEJSZE PORANKI I PORZĄDNE ŚNIADANIA!: MAPOWANIE DOŚWIADCZEŃ RODZICIELSKICH PODCZAS LOCKDOWNU W POLSCE SPOWODOWANEGO PANDEMIA COVID19

Abstrakt. Celem tego badania jest zidentyfikowanie kluczowych momentów w doświadczeniach matek, które były aktywne zawodowo, a jednocześnie opiekowały się dziećmi podczas wprowadzenia ścisłej izolacji społecznej związanej z ogłoszeniem stanu pandemicznego w Polsce między marcem a majem 2020 roku.

Wnioski przedstawione w artykule dotyczą badania mieszanego. Większość danych uzyskano w ankcie zrealizowanej w formule online pomiędzy 14 a 30 maja 2020 roku, w której zebrane zostały 153 odpowiedzi dotyczące najbardziej pozytywnych i najtrudniejszych momentów w doświadczeniu matek, które jednocześnie pracowały i opiekowały się dziećmi. Treści odpowiedzi na pytania otwarte zostały poddane analizie tematycznej. Dane w drugiej części badania uzyskane zostały w pięciu wywiadach pogłębionych z HR business partnerami pracującymi w firmach globalnych. Te wnioski miały charakter uzupełniający i ilustrujący doświadczenia zidentyfikowane w ilościowej części badania.

Wnioski z badań zostały przedstawione w formie listy pozytywnych i negatywnych momentów w doświadczeniach tego okresu. Wśród „trudności” znalazły się m.in. wypełnianie codziennych obowiązków, w szczególności przygotowanie posiłków dla rodziny, a także postrzeganie siebie jako „niewystarczającej matki i niewystarczającego pracownika”. Z kolei doświadczenia pozytywne z tego okresu odnoszą się do wolniejszego tempa życia i docenienia spędzania czasu razem oraz możliwości obserwowania rozwoju i samodzielności dzieci w tej wyjątkowej sytuacji przymusowego pozostańia w domu. Wnioski z badań potwierdzają wagę umożliwiania pracującym matkom decydowania o swoim sposobie pracy, np. ustalania priorytetów, organizowania dnia pracy, a także rolę zapewnienia elastyczności czasowej w wykonywaniu zadań. Druga konkluzja dotyczy konieczności podkreślania jeszcze bardziej niż w czasach przedpandemicznych oczekiwania przełożonego wobec pracy, co odnosi się nie tylko do wymaganych rezultatów, ale także opisania reguł działania w nowych okolicznościach czy określenia poziomu widoczności danej osoby podczas spotkań online.

Slowa kluczowe: doświadczenia pracowników, jakość życia zawodowego, dobre samopoczucie pracowników, praca w domu, równowaga między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym, kryzys COVID.