

Male experiences of work-from-home policy while raising children (0–11 years) during COVID-19: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom (UK) workforce is under unprecedented strain because of the COVID-19 pandemic where many were forced to work from home. While working from home has been a longstanding part of flexible working arrangements and a key part of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) push for 'good work', it was never intended to be the only way that many work. Research suggests that there is a difference between male and female experiences of homeworking; existing literature focuses on women's experiences combined with the additional responsibility of parenthood. The lack of research into the male perspective can largely be attributed to the lack of working from home, in this demographic, before the pandemic. The objective of the research was to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of fathers, during these exceptional circumstances. The research aimed to begin an important discussion around how working from home affects fathers, as well as mothers.

Semi-structured, video conference facilitated, interviews allowed for in-depth qualitative data collection following an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA). Data analysis used IPA methods, which, due to the focus on lived experiences, allowed the voice of the participants to remain and for their interpretation of their experience to be the findings of the study.

Challenging work-life balance was the central theme developed as well as six superordinate themes. This paper brings together five fathers' experiences of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. It shows that these men found it hard to find balance in a world of blurred boundaries; this impacted on them physically and mentally and put unique strains on their relationships. This study is a base for further research around how the pandemic has changed the way the economy works and begins to contribute towards the gaps within existing literature.

Introduction

According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2019), homeworking and flexible working policies have been growing in use, in the UK, for the last 20 years. Furthermore, as a professional body, the CIPD (2020) has been

promoting 'good work' and flexible working arrangements which are foundational to all seven dimensions of a 'good work' strategy. Since the COVID-19 pandemic struck, one key element of flexible working has been used more than most. The work-from-home policy has been implemented on a

wide scale, with many of those who are able, instructed to work from home (BBC News, 2020).

While much of the research into the effectiveness of this policy has been based around the measurement of productivity and efficiency (Austin-Egole et al., 2020; Avgoustaki & Bessa, 2019; Kotey & Sharma, 2019), little has explored the impact of widespread homeworking on the employee experience, particularly in a phenomenon such as a global pandemic (Waizenegger et al., 2020). However, there has been much research into the impact of working from home, and other flexible working arrangements, on women, and particularly women who have young families. Therefore, this research endeavoured to explore how the working-from-home policy affected fathers who had children of primary school age (11) and younger. By exploring the lived experiences of the men, with children in this age group, it was hoped that there would be a practical application/outcome when considering options for how the future of the homeworking contract should look.

It is noted here that the separation between pandemic and non-pandemic conditions will naturally make the results more complex. Specifically, it may be difficult to distinguish between pandemic effects and homeworking conditions, such as the pressures to teach children while not at school having an undue impact on time to work, creating the illusion that work was more intense when the reality was the factor of childcare made work feel more pressured. However, it was the intention to also try to identify effects that may occur in a non-pandemic context.

Historical context

The origins of the office and the professional work environment can be found at the dawn of the industrial revolution where the need for administrative staff became central to the capitalist model to work. The workplace was no longer focused on agriculture or outdoor physical labour but rather a place of machines and labourers and perhaps most importantly administrative staff – and

so the office was born (The Economist, 2020). Since the days of offices being inspired by the Taylorism focus on production efficiency (Conti & Warner, 1994), the office has changed how it looks but its role in organisations and employees' lives remain largely unchanged.

Until the 21st century, technological advancements were focused on improving office effectiveness but with the rise of digital technology, offices no longer have to be in one geographical location (Al-Rodhan & Stoudmann, 2006; Bianchi & Labory, 2018; Marsh, 2012). Big-tech companies like Apple and Google paved the way for innovative office design and pioneering ways to truly engage with employees (Patel, 2020; Pitchforth et al., 2020). One of the key innovations from the tech-office revolution is the ability to have flexible working arrangements. It can be argued that there are two main aspects to this flexibility: temporal and spatial.

Flexible working

According to Ross and Ressia (2015) many organisations offer flexible working arrangements through what is known as 'flexitime'. They argue that this is the temporal factor which is focused on time as an aspect within the wider employee relationship. In contrast, there is a spatial element which accounts for geographical differences which focuses on the place of work and how that impacts the wider employee relationship. Ross and Ressia (2015) conclude that perhaps there is a third way emerging, a spatio-temporal approach, a model of working that allows for working from home as well as the office, at times which are convenient for the employee.

In the UK, the Human Resources (HR) professional body produced research reports and policy pilots that advocated this new way of working (Maxwell et al., 2007). Since 2014, when flexible working arrangements were further protected in law, work-from-home policies have become a key part of an organisation's approach to enhance employee productivity and efficiency (Setiyani et al., 2019). The core idea of flexibility being the biggest

attraction for employees who have external commitments and may need the ability to work from home during a family emergency or in an evening to allow time off for a child's sports day. All these factors led to the rising popularity of such policy prior to 2020 (Sulaymonov, 2020).

Rationale

Having a comprehensive and fundamentally positive working contract is seen by many as the key to long-term organisational success in the super-dynamic 21st-century working world (Litchfield et al., 2016). Therefore, employee wellbeing is important for employee satisfaction and organisational performance (Ho & Kuvaas, 2020). It has been argued that having a work-from-home policy has a direct impact on employee productivity, but little regard has been given to the impact on employees' mental and physical wellbeing.

Furthermore, the almost instant and widespread implementation of working from home has had a unique impact on this policy that was never intended to be the only way to work. Furthermore, traditionally in society, men are not usually in a position where they work from home, not least in a situation where children need to be home-schooled and all the usual responsibilities of parenthood exist.

Research question

Being guided by the existing research and observing the impact of the working-from-home policy, the following research question was investigated: *What are the experiences of men who work from home and have children under the age of 11?*

Research aim

This research aimed to explore the impact of working from home on fathers of children aged 0–11 years. Specifically, it sought to examine their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature review

The CIPD (2020) defines work from home, within a HR viewpoint, as the set of policies that facilitate an employee to work away from the main workplace, within their place of residence. Walk Me (2021), a leading HR software organisation, defines work from home simply as the work that occurs remotely. Within a COVID-19 context, it has been used in a way that means that there could be an addition to these definitions to include a recognition of the temporal aspect. For example, before the pandemic work from home was used as part of a balanced, flexible working arrangements package, whereas now it is used, for many but not all, as the only way to work. Therefore, the time spent working from home should be recognised as two distinct aspects; one where it is the main way of work, and one where it is part of a benefit package.

Aspects of working from home

It is important to note that there is a difference between pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic working-from-home contexts. In a pre-pandemic setting this can be seen through a flexible working arrangements package (Bussin et al., 2017). Importantly, it is not the only way to work but rather an option, open to those who want it, for additional flexibility.

Pandemic working from home is the only way of work and therefore is not part of a balanced rewards package (Wang et al., 2020). This also came with additional pressures for parents who could work from home, such as childcare and home-schooling that were necessary because of the 'lockdown' in the UK (Waizenegger et al., 2020). It is hard to speculate what a post-pandemic set-up may look like; however, it is likely to play a much larger part within the employee contract and it may also follow a hybrid method (Fayard et al., 2021). However, it is likely that schooling and childcare will resume to those professionals who teach children and provide childcare services for working parents. Although, Feng and Savani (2020) posit that it is not just parents who multi-task while working from home,

but more widely, domestic tasks are likely to get done during 'breaks' taken during the day.

The impacts of working from home

The literature identified was largely focused on women's and young mothers' perspectives; there appeared to be a paucity of research that examines men's experiences of homeworking. Nevertheless, there were three main, recurring themes, evident in the literature in relation to experiences of working from home. These themes are: physical impact (Chung et al., 2020; Green et al., 2020; Oakman et al., 2020; Sharma & Vaish, 2020); social impact (Ammons & Markham, 2004; Baruch, 2001; Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Wang et al., 2021); and emotional/mental impact (Broadway et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2021; Stafie et al., 2021; Van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2018; Van Hal, 2015). One minor theme, which lacked an extensive body of research, was the influence of masculinity (Chung et al., 2020; Pučétaité, et al., 2020). The inclusion of this area was undertaken to provide some surface level understanding of what could help explain the 'why' some men feel differently about working from home than others (Clark et al., 2020).

It should be noted that the focus of the studies reviewed relate to a pandemic context unless otherwise stated.

The physical impact of working from home

The physical health impact on parents working from home is discussed by Sharma and Vaish (2020) who explored the physical effects such as back pain, strained eyes, and less time to exercise. They attributed this to working longer hours, which in itself, is a result of home-schooling etc. in this particular study. They reported that mothers find it increasingly difficult to maintain their physical health.

While this study is focused on an Indian perspective, the results are highly indicative of broader trends regardless of where one resides. They go on to argue that individual figures may differ between location, however, broadly, there is

an impact on the physical health of work-from-home mothers (Sharma & Vaish, 2020).

Similarly, Green et al. (2020) suggest that the impact on physical health, for parents in particular, was due to a lack of organisational preparedness. This, they assert, compounded with other factors, such as social isolation, led to a greater impact on wellbeing.

In contrast, Oakman et al. (2020) suggested that even in prepared organisations, the transition to full-time working from home has led to negative physical effects on employees. They recommend that organisations implement a holistic work-from-home policy that is based on reducing the impacts overall.

Therefore, overall, regardless of the causality, what the literature appears to indicate, on a broader level, is that there is a physical health impact on people working from home, perhaps more so on parents. Therefore, this will form a key line of enquiry within this study.

The social impact of work from home

The social impact on parents working from home was well documented in the literature. Unlike the themes of physical and emotional impact, which are very recent in terms of being an area that is studied, the social impacts of homeworking have been researched since working from home became protected in law.

Baruch (2001) offers perhaps the broadest insight into working from home which, at the time of study, was one of the newest ways of working that came about due to the expansion of technologies that made such working possible. This study suggested that there are both positive and negative aspects associated with this type of working and that perhaps one of the most significant disadvantages is the ideas around social isolation. This has since been developed by others, for example Cooper and Kurland (2002), and Ammons and Markham (2004).

In more recent times, and particularly centred on the COVID-19 pandemic, research by Wang et al. (2021) focused on how working from home negatively impacted loneliness, especially where there are more home distractions such as parents and, in this study, mothers. It has been argued that levels of loneliness can be dependent on job type; whether it is full-time, part-time, waged, salaried, levels of responsibility and levels of contact with colleagues i.e. being in Zoom meetings all day (Etheridge et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is argued that the role itself plays the largest part, if the employee is working in a team with meetings, this level of loneliness or sense of isolation will be different to those who are 'lone workers' like those working in call centres (Bauer & Silver, 2018; Lee et al., 2014; Razai et al., 2020).

The emotional impact of work from home

One theme that has become increasingly a part of the existing literature is an understanding and awareness of the mental health and emotional impact on parents working from home. This theme is often linked with feelings of social isolation (Golden & Veiga, 2008). Broadway et al. (2020) explore the rising number of mental health issues that are reported by parents who are working from home. This is further consolidated by Van der Lippe and Lippényi (2018) who argue that working from home increases work-family conflict, due to longer working hours, which in turn affects the mental health of those involved. They further explore that the impact is equal between men and women. Cheng et al. (2021) suggest an opposing perspective, and this study concludes that the burdens of working from home are not shared equally and therefore the emotional impact is different.

On the whole, however, there is a recognition of the emotional impact on parents working from home, and Stafie et al. (2021) develop this further to conclude that there is a need for psychological support when working from home with additional responsibilities such as home-schooling, childcare for young children and the additional tasks of running the house as both an office and a home.

They go on to argue that while these factors are exacerbated in the lockdown due to home-schooling, running a house as both home and office is a factor in and out of the pandemic context. Overall, it has been argued that there is an emotional impact of working from home and therefore will be explored further in this study.

The influence of gender stereotypes

This is a theme that is less well represented among the literature, due in part, to the lack of male-focused studies. However, from two articles found, it does raise interesting conclusions that are worth noting, as a potential wider context for the reasons why men feel a certain way about working from home.

Chung et al. (2020) explored the role that working from home has on gender equality and specifically what the role of fathers was during the pandemic. Notably, they found that the workload of household responsibilities was more proportionately balanced, although fathers were doing more during the COVID-19 pandemic than before. They go on to briefly explore the role that the ideas and perceptions of the stereotype of 'masculinity' affect why some men perceive their role to be the 'doer' and the one going to work and their partner to be focused on running the household. While this was identified as an archaic stereotype, they explored that subconscious bias remained. While this research is focused elsewhere, it is interesting that masculinity accounts for some of the findings, and while this study is not particularly focused on this factor, if it were to come up in the interviews this would provide a strong indication of where future research could be conducted.

In contrast, but in contrast a comparatively weaker study, Pučėtaitė et al. (2020) explore this idea of masculinity within a framework of providing identity and coping strategies for men who are not used to being in charge of household responsibilities as well as work. Overall, it has been argued that the ideas and perceptions of masculinity have been an influencing factor when it comes to the way men

work from home. It would be interesting if that came across in this study.

The case for further study

As discussed, the need for further study is evident in the gap in the existing literature which fails to adequately explore the experiences and impact of working from home from a male perspective and in particular men with young families. While there is an abundance of literature about the reasons why women are disproportionately impacted in 'normal' times (Boca et al., 2020; Craig & Churchill, 2020), little research has been undertaken in a pandemic context. Therefore, this study will explore these impacts through the lived experiences of fathers and let them interpret their experiences which will allow a unique insight into this situation and demographic, paying specific attention to the physical, social and emotional impacts.

Methodology

It has been argued that, when conducting research, it is important that the researcher makes their philosophical position clear (Cassell et al., 2017; Quinlan et al., 2019). It is argued that an interpretivist approach should be used when the research aim is one of understanding and explaining human experience (Barbour, 2008; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is the aim of this study to understand the 'lived experiences' of work-from-home fathers and as a result, considered interpretivist.

Phenomenology (Moran, 2002) aims to explore the lived experiences of subjects and focuses on the response to phenomena. In the case of this study, which aims to explore the experiences of work-from-home fathers due to the phenomena of the COVID-19 pandemic, this approach is the most appropriate to take forward. As a result of rejecting the notion of universal objective truth, phenomenology aims to provide a framework of understanding for others in that particular experience. It is important to note that this kind of study is not without disadvantages (Eatough &

Smith, 2008). One relevant example is that the success of the study can be dependent on the participants' ability to articulate their thoughts and feelings. This is especially so if the subject area is one that causes embarrassment or discomfort when recounting their experience. Sensitivity will be maintained throughout the interviews; however, the subject matter is not one that should cause great discomfort. Therefore, this disadvantage can be mitigated.

Phenomenologists aim to explore and understand the universal nature of experience rather than provide universal fact. This distinction means that there is no intention to gain statistically provable fact and therefore only aims to give a voice to those who are or have lived through an experience. The value of such research comes from the insight it provides into lived experiences (Gill, 2014).

Selection of participants

The sampling approach used in this study is generic purposive sampling (Bell et al., 2018). This non-probability technique allows the researcher to specifically select participants based on their relevance to the requirements of the research. This method was chosen as it allows the research to include participants who are hard to access and because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, purposeful selection allows the study to take place and fits well with the wider research approach (Bell et al., 2018).

Participants were purposely selected through a two-phase process: awareness and then meeting selection criteria. Social media was used to circumvent the challenges associated with face-to-face recruitment due to COVID-19, to raise awareness among potential participants before then going through the selection process and consenting to participation in the study. By enabling others to share this request, it was able to go beyond the researcher's account to maximise opportunity.

The use of personal social media accounts raises ethical considerations because some personal data

can be collected without consent. In response to this, the study encouraged participants to privately get in touch, and strict confidentiality was maintained throughout the selection process. Alternatively, participants could have been recruited through other methods such as a selection survey, however, the scale of the project, the COVID-19 pandemic, and time constraints makes this more complex and would make it considerably harder for the study to be completed within the time frame given. The study was granted ethical approval by the Huddersfield Business School.

At the beginning of the selection process, 11 men registered an interest in participating in the study. After reading the information sheet, or not responding to the contact, six men agreed to participate in the research. Following the selection criteria, and having the opportunity to ask any questions, five men participated in the study.

Table 1: Selection criteria

Selection Criteria
Fluent English
Over 18 years of age
Lives and works in the UK (<i>organisation can be transnational</i>)
Are currently working from home, <u>OR</u>
Have worked from home in the last 12 months (<i>after 23rd March 2020</i>)
Have children at home under the age of 11

Data collection

Semi-structured interviewing was deemed to be an appropriate method of data collection (Barriball & While, 1994; Rabionet, 2011). Additionally, they were deemed to be the most appropriate way to explore the lived experiences of the participants. Focus groups were explored as part of the design process, however, due to the added complications caused by the COVID-19 travel restrictions, combined with the changing direction of the aim of the research meant that this would not have been appropriate. Furthermore, observations, another

commonly used method in qualitative research, would not have been appropriate due to the nature of the research question being highly personal (Bell et al., 2018).

Zoom and Microsoft Teams were used to carry out the semi-structured interviews, using whichever software package the participants were most comfortable with to minimise psychological stress. A disadvantage of using video conferencing methods is that the use of body language can be minimised due to technological issues and poor camera quality. This means that signs of discomfort could be missed and could lead to misinterpretation of what has been said, so active listening is going to be a key part of minimising the impact of bias on the research.

However, a clear advantage is the broad geographical coverage which allows the participants to be anywhere in the country (Gray et al., 2020). This means that there is no travel involved which opens up the research to a wider population of potential participants. Thus, when considering the additional restrictions placed on this project due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the lack of the need to read body language to make a meaningful contribution to the research, Zoom and Microsoft Teams offered the best way forward.

Through the creation of an interview rubric, it allowed for some structure within the interview, however, with the recognition that flexibility was required. Due to the nature of the research this aided the exploratory nature of the question at hand. The open nature of the questions means that there could be a situation where the data was not all entirely relevant to the study, however, the impact of this was reduced through the interviewer guiding the discussions to remain on topic.

Data analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) was the method of data analysis chosen. In this approach there are two aims: how the

participant makes sense of their situation, and what the experience was like. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, and the research approach taken, this analysis technique was the most suitable. Other methods such as narrative analysis could have been used within the boundaries of qualitative research methods (Bell et al., 2018). This would have been unsuitable for the study, however, due to its focus on 'how' people tell stories of their experiences. Similarly, thematic analysis would have been unsuitable due to the approach taken in the study which was interpretative phenomenological in nature.

The interviews were transcribed, anonymised and formatted for ease of analysis. The process of analysis used the work of Smith et al. (2009) to shape the coding process to aid the discussion and conclusions of the study.

The following four-stage process was used:

- *Stage one – Transcripts were read, and significant phrases were extracted.*

At this stage, it was all about gaining a broad awareness of what was going on through the transcripts. Due to the approach taken, none of the researcher's opinions were added and only the participants' experiences were noted.

- *Stage two – Emergent themes were identified.*

After stage one, the researcher went through each individual transcript and identified relevant themes.

- *Stage three – Possible connected themes were noted.*

At this stage, the researcher linked common themes that appeared across all transcripts and compiled a table of common themes.

- *Stage four – Themes checked against transcript.*

This final stage was conducted as a quality control and made sure that the themes were still relevant to the transcripts and that they included quotes to add depth and show connection to the original experiences of the participants.

Participants

Five men who were selected because they were eligible and willing, had completed written consent forms and had read the information sheet were interviewed. The men's ages ranged between the ages of 33 and 52 with the mean average age being 41.2. The individual profiles can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Participant profiles

A	A is a 36-year-old man who lives in Scarborough, UK. He mentioned his work had changed during the pandemic and he was now playing a role in a local faith-based charity. He had been working from home since July 2020, having been previously furloughed. His wife and their two youngest children (aged three and five) are at home. The eldest child is at university.
B	B is a 33-year-old man who lives in Leeds, UK. He works as a customer sales assistant and was furloughed before working from home since June 2020. His partner and two children (aged one and eight) are at home.
C	C is a 45-year-old man who lives in Kent, UK. He worked from home, briefly, during the initial lockdown before being furloughed. Since August 2020 he has worked from home. He is a peripatetic training consultant. His wife and their son (aged 10) are at home.
D	D is a 36-year-old man who lives in Sheffield, UK. He worked from home throughout the pandemic for a healthcare provider, briefly changing roles, and was put on gardening leave before returning to work from home. His wife and their three children (aged seven and twins aged four) are at home.
E	E is a 52-year-old man who lives in Wakefield, UK. He worked through the pandemic with healthcare providers. He has been working from home since 8

<p>March 2020, which was before the government mandated the stay-at-home order. His wife and their youngest daughter (aged 10) are at home. The eldest child is at university.</p>
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Findings

Six superordinate themes were identified through data analysis. These are: time saved on commute, partner is affected, challenging to maintain control, physical health impacted, challenging additional household responsibilities such as home-schooling, and struggling to deal with the lack of social interaction. Each of these superordinate themes had a number of subordinate themes, and due to the interconnected nature, reporting of these superordinate themes is interwoven with the reporting of the subordinate themes. In reporting the findings participants' words are used to retain the voice of them sharing their experiences. This approach is key to this method of analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

Theme one: Time saved on the commute

All five participants identified different ways in which they had saved time by not commuting and the impact it had on them. They identified the impact this had on two areas of their lives: productivity and the ability to be more flexible. This led to the development of two subordinate themes which explore the impact of this 'extra time'.

All participants identified that they had a certain flexibility within their working from home. They had hours that were set in terms of when they had to be available but when they 'do' their job was largely up to them. Participant D said:

'I'm expected to be available between half eight and half five most days but that isn't my working day. I often work before, during and after those hours.'

While Participant A said:

'cos you're not using the car so much and time wise, you're not spending that time travelling and things ... so you can take an hour here or there'.

Similarly, Participant C highlighted:

'The lack of travel ... I'm about to walk my son to school or take a walk with my wife'.

In contrast, Participant B admitted to additional flexibility but said that:

'between the kids and work you can hardly believe you had time to commute before'.

In contrast to Participants A, B and C, Participants D and E explained that they had flexibility but rarely wanted to use it:

'I do have the flexibility to disappear for an hour or two if needs be'. (Participant D)

With Participant E saying:

'I can stop and have an hour for lunch which doesn't happen often – it just depends on the day.'

While all five participants identified that time had been saved due to not commuting, four of them explained that this additional time had meant greater productivity. One participant recounted how they:

'can be at work in a second ... blessing and occasionally a curse ... x amount of work and so I find I have to be a lot more disciplined not to work'. (Participant C)

It became apparent that this was not an isolated scenario with another participant saying this about their experience:

'I just worked through it as in 14/16-hour days worked through it'. (Participant D)

Similarly, Participant A identified that due to other factors such as the enforced lockdowns:

'I have nowhere else to go and because I'm not going places, I might as well work ... managing my own time is a part of my job, so yeah.'

In another example:

'Once I was working from home it was still pretty much the same hours but once there was lockdown ... I'd generally been starting at 8 and finishing between 5 and 6 ... which is probably an hour or two longer than usual'. (Participant E)

So, it could be argued that these men did not actually save time at all as it was coupled with the expectation and/or temptation to work longer hours. This leads to an interesting overlap of themes where the impact on the partner was brought in as a direct link: 'she objects to me working quite so much' (Participant E).

Theme two: Partner is impacted

The different ways in which their partner had been impacted by them working from home, whether this was positive ($n = 2$) or negative ($n = 3$) was discussed by all participants. In all scenarios, two common themes emerged: 1) their partners struggled to adjust; and 2) there was a perception that they were either not working or were working too hard.

All participants spoke of the adjustments that their partners had to make, and they explained that they had struggled to make the transition to working from home. As one participant put it: 'the lines have become so blurred' (Participant B).

Another said their partner thought:

'I'm just going upstairs to escape the kids for a few hours',

further explaining that:

'when I'm at work I'm at work' as opposed to 'just dossing around' (Participant A).

Participant C offered a different insight, explaining that while:

'my wife is genuinely pleased that I'm working from home ... there was still an adjustment to be made'.

Participant E explained that his partner:

'wants me to finish at five whereas I have to finish when stuff's finished'

It is this tension that can occur during the transition that these men identify as an impact of their working from home.

Perceptions of either not working or working too hard:

'she objects to me working quite so much' (Participant E),

'she doesn't see it as working from home' (Participant B).

This subordinate theme is one of contrast and highlights the competing perceptions that these men have to juggle when working from home. On the one hand they explained that their partners often thought that they were not working. Participant A explained that:

'getting her head around I'm at work, as opposed to I'm at home, just dossing around is quite a challenge'.

Participant B experienced a similar scenario where:

'she sees it as "you're at home, you're not doing anything" even though in between you are getting on with different things'.

On the other hand, they explained that their partners complained if they were working too much, which they said was when they worked longer hours. Participant E said:

'she objects to me working quite so much ... it just exacerbates some of the tension'.

Participant D explained that his wife:

'liked the fact I'm here' but 'not the long hours ... well, the longer than usual working hours'.

In a similar way, Participant C explained that his wife is:

'genuinely pleased ... that I'm home all the time' but that it is just 'too easy to get drawn into x amount of work'.

This tension led most of the men to discuss how they found keeping a balance hard between all the competing elements of their lives.

Theme three: Challenging to maintain control

In this study all five participants said that there was a need for a balance and that overall, this was hard to maintain. They identified that the lack of clear boundaries between the two elements of life led to this which in turn led to the subordinate theme being developed which explores how 'blurred lines' had an impact.

All participants spoke of the need for balance and how it was quite hard to not let one particular part

of their life take over from the others. It was explained that:

'it's very easy to get absorbed in work upstairs ... so again there's a balance to be had' (Participant A).

Participant C said:

'there's no break from the environment ... so you have to really be disciplined to make sure that work doesn't take over'.

Participant D offered a similar but different insight saying:

'I've said at times I feel like a teenager. I get up, I roll to my desk, I work, I roll back into my bed ... I have no concept of balance, it's all or nothing for me'.

Participant E explained that due to the 'command and control' nature of his work there was no line between work and home and said:

'you're not spending time travelling to work so you're more likely to spend that time working ... the biggest issues are meetings run back to back so you're not getting time in between ... other days I could take two hours for a lunch break ... there is definitely a balance to be had; it just isn't the most natural'. (Participant E)

This would indicate that the idea that working from home saves time is bogus as the time saved is then used for more work. This could be seen as a temporary response to pandemic conditions; however, as the men made it clear that it was 'easier' to work longer hours this would suggest that it could be an expectation in the longer term and outside the pandemic phenomenon.

Theme four: physical health is impacted

The impact of working from home on physical health was discussed by all participants who explained the different ways in which their physical health had been affected. They then drew a link between the need for physical health for strong mental health. The wider contextual theme of masculinity came through this.

While all these men identified that their physical health had been affected, there seemed to be a split between them, with some explaining that they had less time to exercise. Participant D explained:

'I've done less exercise ... you just end up going from call to call'.

This was further explained by Participant E who said:

'I have definitely gone out less, whether that's because I've worked more or the lockdown restrictions or probably a healthy mix of the two.'

Participant A had a more general outlook and said, 'you're not getting out and getting as much fresh air'. Participant C seemed to be the most affected, explaining:

'I had been training for 10 hours per week and now I go out for walk with my wife on a Thursday.'

In contrast to all the other men, Participant B explained, 'I actually have exercised more.' This was an outlier opinion, however, due to the other men exploring this idea of less exercise, it was still developed as a theme.

In a slight contrast to the previous theme, however, the theme was explored as an extension of having less time to exercise. Some of the men explained that their physical health had been affected and they found themselves doing different exercise to before. Participant A explained:

'I suppose that the type of exercise open to me has changed in that I'm not able to be on my feet all day but I am able to join the family on a walk.'

Participant C consolidated this idea rather bluntly, saying:

'I used to do karate ... now I go for walks.'

In a similarly dejected manner, Participant D explained:

'I am walking the kids to school now so that's different.'

However, Participant B explained that the different exercise had actually:

'become part of my bedtime routine so I've been able to improve my health by being more focused and having my eyes opened to other ways I can exercise'.

Participant E was not particularly active before so while he exercised less, it was not different to before he worked from home. It has been seen that the largest three factors involved here are lockdown restrictions, additional responsibilities and longer working hours, therefore only the latter is specifically related to working from home.

Most of the men explained that for them there was a link between their physical and mental health. Participant A explained:

'There's also an effect, kind of physical/mental effect that you have to make sure you get out otherwise it would be very easy to get into a rut.'

Participant B explained that his increased physical activity was in fact a result of poor mental health:

'Even though I exercise more, I know it is my anxiety coming through and so it definitely has had its impact on mental health.'

Participant C explored the impact of the lack of physical training he was able to do:

'I used to train six to seven hours a week at least, now that I'm not, I would say that my emotional health has been a bit low.'

Participant D offered a more rounded view, not solely blaming physical health for his poor mental health, rather giving some credit to the additional responsibilities such as home-schooling:

'I'm not physically better off ... that has had its impact on me emotionally, but so has a lot of other things that have been going on like home-schooling the kids.'

Participant E explained that:

'I'm not a particularly active person but not getting out for walks, especially in the early lockdown definitely had an impact on me.'

Theme five: Challenging additional household responsibilities such as home-schooling

This superordinate theme was developed because all five participants identified different ways in which additional household responsibilities had been made clear to them, and the pressure of these, including home-schooling added 'a different dynamic' to their experiences. They explained that home-schooling had been challenging and was draining combined with work.

Most of the men confirmed that they had experienced challenges when home-schooling. Participant A passionately explained:

'the eldest of the two has just started school while the other one is still at nursery so definitely when we went into lockdown keeping them both occupied was an interesting challenge to say the least.'

The challenges were not limited to one household, with Participant B saying:

'Having a seven-year-old who is disengaged with school anyway it has been difficult to get him to work and that has had its impact on both me and my partner.'

Participant C said even though:

'you can leave him reading or watching or whatever it is but he's 10 ... he's inquisitive so there is always a question to answer ... it's not just as simple as letting him get on with his work.'

Participant D had three children at home, saying,

'My eldest kid is seven and he can just be sat on his tablet working through things quite happily, but the twins require a lot more attention and they both learn differently ... so quite frankly, hellish.'

Participant E was an outlier in this theme. He explained that when the school sent work his partner was able to set their daughter going on the tasks, so he experienced had very little complexity with home-schooling.

Furthermore, some of the men explained that teaching their children was draining combined with work and explained that it was difficult when balancing work as well as teaching their children. Participant A explained that it has been a whirlwind:

'Quite how we managed I don't know, but here we are, we survived.'

Similarly, Participant B shared:

'There's no peace or respite and hardly any time to work.'

Participant C provided the most comical answer:

'Fortunately the schools have gone back [laughs] don't get me wrong, I love my son, but it just makes it easier to work without the pressure of having to keep an eye on him ... he's not that bad but it definitely adds a different dynamic to it.'

Participant D described the additional responsibility:

'I think when there's just one of you, three children and a full-time job it's just impossible.'

Theme six: Struggling to deal with the lack of social interaction

Four participants identified different ways in which they were struggling with the lack of social interactions. Participants identified two groups of people which they struggled with not meeting or seeing face to face:

Lack of contact with wider family and colleagues:

'Not being able to talk to co-workers is hard' (Participant B).

'Not seeing the wider family has been difficult to say the least' (Participant C).

All participants explained that even though they did not always like to socialise, they missed the contact of seeing family, friends and colleagues. Participant A said: 'not being able to see my mum and dad has been really strange', further explaining, 'doing everything on Zoom or Teams just isn't the same, is it?'

Similarly, Participant C said:

'While there has been more valuable family time, the three of us, it has been hard not seeing our parents, especially my wife's parents who live away' and that 'Teams is a godsend but it still isn't the same'.

These men's experiences were focused on the lack of social interaction as a result of pandemic restrictions and not necessarily the working-from-home arrangements. The other men focused more on missing out on work social connections, with Participant B saying:

'I cannot wait for the social interactions ... it's something I cherish.'

Participant D explained:

'Not being able to meet colleagues has been challenging in a different way ... because I've never met them it makes our relationships feel quite superficial and that is challenging.'

Participant E was surprised by his own response, saying:

'I'm quite introverted and even I've missed the interactions with colleagues.' These men were more focused on the impact that working from home had on their professional experiences and the isolation they felt as a result of using what they described as 'superficial' methods of communication.

Discussion

This study's findings shows that there was an impact on all participants related to working from home. Participants detailed the struggle they experienced when trying to find a balance between work and household responsibilities such as home-schooling and childcare, that had been additional due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

The social impact

This study found that there was an impact on partners that placed unique tension on relationships. Researchers as early as Baruch (2001) were quick to realise the social impact of working from home and identified social isolation and loneliness as key impacts. However, this study's findings showed a largely negative experience on social relationships, which contradicts Baruch (2001) who argued that there were also positive social impacts such as additional family time. While this was mentioned by all participants when they explained that relationships with their partners had been under increased strain. This links with the first theme which, while suggesting that the time was saved, this time was in fact used to work, which resulted in them working longer hours and not being present during this 'extra' family time as they were multi-tasking. This 'extra time' was caused by the pandemic forcing work from home. However, the reality is that outside a pandemic setting, those who work from home work longer hours (Arntz et al., 2019), and it is even easier because there no need to home-school children.

Many of the participants attributed this additional tension to the household responsibilities explored in theme five. Van der Lippe and Lippényi (2018) argue that working from home increases family conflict as a result of the perceptions that the household workload is uneven. This study's findings support this conclusion, as participants described their partners' perceptions that they were either not working or working too hard, both of which prevented them from taking part in the bulk of household responsibilities.

This theme was explored by Feng and Savani (2020) where women are identified as the gender which is expected to bear more of the household responsibilities. These findings could explain why the men reported extra tension within the relationship, and further study could be undertaken to arrive at a more conclusive result.

As a result of having work and additional household responsibilities these men felt increasingly isolated from their colleagues but particularly their family and friends. Golden and Veiga (2008) explored social isolation when working from home, and Wang et al. (2021) further support this finding in a lockdown pandemic setting.

This study's findings extend this further with the men in this study explaining that the 'busyness' of their lives as a result of working longer hours, additional childcare responsibilities and running a house means that they are unable to socialise in the same way as before. This is not solely due to working from home, as childcare is an immediate phenomenon, whereas working longer hours is more likely to be the longer-term experience of working from home. These feelings of social isolation are further compounded by the lockdown restrictions prohibiting meetings with family and friends.

The physical and mental health impact

A further finding of this study was that participants felt that 'work from home' had led to a broader impact on both their physical and mental health,

which they linked together. The impact on physical health has been explored in themes one, three and four. The mental health impact has been explored more specifically through theme four and is a common element in most of the discussions that took place in the interviews.

This study found that participants saved time by no longer commuting, however, it was not time they could use to help balance their life, instead they worked longer hours. This led to greater work productivity, but it came at a personal cost as it placed their relationships under pressure. This had both a physical and emotional impact on the men.

The idea that greater productivity and tense personal relations is not a new conclusion (Boles et al., 2004; Yang et al., 2000). However, the idea that this had an impact greater than just one individual, extends the conclusions of current literature as their partners suffered as well as themselves and, in some circumstances, particularly for Participants A and B, it affected the children too.

Participants explained how they struggled to maintain a balance between all aspects of their life; they referred to the 'blurred lines' of work and home life. This is congruent with much of the existing literature already discussed. Broadway et al. (2020) explored the rising cases of poor mental health among parents. This study's findings would suggest that while the impact might be different on men and women, there is an impact on men's mental health particularly in households where they take on additional responsibilities. In contrast, Cheng et al. (2021) suggested that the impact is equal between men and women. These findings would suggest that there is a need for further research to explore the differences between genders.

The impact on physical health has been a result of lockdown restrictions as well as working from home, however, more so because of the former than the latter. All participants explained that they felt supported by work in sourcing equipment that helped reduce the impacts of, for example, back pain and eye strain, areas explored by Sharma and Vaish

(2020). Green et al. (2020) suggested that a lack of organisational preparedness impacts the physical wellbeing of those who work from home. However, these findings contradict this. Therefore, key literature around workplace physical health impacts is different to that of the findings because these organisational factors for physical health had been mitigated in these men's experiences. However, broader impacts such as working longer hours (a result of the working from home) and not being able to go outside for exercise (a result of the pandemic) has negatively impacted them.

Robinson (2006) argues that there are lines that should not be crossed for a healthy work-life balance, with working from home blurring these lines, as shown in this research.

Study limitations

Within the confines of an undergraduate dissertation project the limitations are significant. Everything from resources, to time, to sample size all offer up their own unique challenges. However, there is an added layer of complexity that is a result of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown situation that we found ourselves in at the time this research was conducted. For example, what were once quite commonplace approaches to data collection such as interviews and focus groups, are much harder to organise and gain the same quality qualitative responses which also relies on body language and intonation which can be missed when relying on technological communication. To this extent the limitations of this project are greater than if it were conducted in a non-pandemic background.

One of the key limitations that came to light during the data analysis process was that participants were from different professions, and this influenced the level of support they received. It also influenced how easy it was for them to adapt to a working-from-home policy. This is a factor that needs to be considered in future study. This could have been improved by focusing the study on a particular sector or profession (Bickman, & Rog, 2008).

The final limitation of this study is the researcher's lack of experience in conducting qualitative research; in particular conducting semi-structured interviews. Therefore, this could have been improved by running a pilot interview to help identify weaknesses and prepare for the interviews differently.

Researcher objectivity

As with most research that is based on personal experience, the findings are naturally subjective. However, this is appropriate for the study and philosophical approach taken and therefore the researcher cannot allow his opinions to come through; participants' responses reflect their own experiences. This will enable the right conclusions to be drawn without any preconceptions.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore and gain a first-hand understanding of fathers' experiences of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the findings, this study identifies six key ways in which the working-from-home has impacted the men in this study. The overarching theme of this study is that these men felt that the impact on home life was due to the blurred boundaries which put a strain on their physical and mental health, with their relationships coming under unique strain. The researcher recognises that due to the phenomena that is the unprecedented global health crisis, these experiences are highly reflective of the additional restrictions and not a true reflection of what working from home would be like during times with little to no restrictions. However, it provides a crucial insight into the experiences of a demographic that, rarely before, has been in a work-from-home situation and therefore is an under-researched demographic.

Recommendations for further research

This small-scale, exploratory study has identified that more studies are needed on the impact of 'work from home' on fathers.

Future research could explore the impact that profession has on experiences of working from home. Additionally, while the geographical spread of participants offers a wide range of views on the research topic, there was an absence of cultural diversity in the five men which may have had an impact on their experiences, however, this was not particularly noticeable in the findings. This could be improved in future studies by adopting a further selection criterion which keeps the geographical location small to avoid this (Bickman & Rog, 2008).

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