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**Stream 5: “Exploring Behavioural Equality: New Frontiers in Gender Research”**

**Title:** Changes in fathers’ use of flexible work arrangements: A sense of entitlement perspective

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**Abstract**

This paper draws on the capabilities approach as a framework for examining how the stay-at-home directives instituted during the Covid-19 lockdowns impacted fathers’ sense of entitlement to work from home post-pandemic. We build on both the work of Hobson and colleagues (2011), who first employed Sen’s (1999) capabilities approach to investigate work-life balance capabilities, and Chatrakul Na Ayudhya and colleagues (2019), who developed the sense of entitlement concept as being a cognitive filter that weakens or strengthens an individual’s perception of their agency to enact their capabilities. Drawing on 62 interviews conducted with UK-based managers who are also parents, we show how lockdown experiences of working from home have enhanced the sense of entitlement to this working practice, leading to an increase particularly in fathers’ agency and capabilities to use flexible working arrangements. Our findings help to identify the combination of factors that are key in changing fathers’ behavioural intentions with regard to flexible work and thus potentially furthering gender equality.

**Introduction**

The experience of homeworking on an unprecedented scale during the Covid-19 pandemic has reinvigorated debates about flexible work and gender inequality (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). However, while the disproportionately detrimental effects of enforced homeworking on women, particularly mothers, have now been well-documented by scholars (Collins et al., 2021; Dinella et al., 2023; Laß & Wooden, 2023; Liu & Gan, 2024; Sun et al., 2023), the effects of the ‘great homeworking experiment’ on men’s and, particularly, fathers’ work and caregiving patterns are less well understood. This is important as changes in men’s work and caregiving roles hold the promise of reducing gender inequality (Buchler & Lutz, 2021; Langner & Furstenberg, 2020; Lewis & Stumbitz, 2017; Warren, 2022).

Before the pandemic men’s family roles were undergoing incremental changes, with growing expectations for men to be ‘involved fathers’ and partners (Ewald et al., 2020; Lewington et al., 2021). Yet there was little change in fathers’ paid employment patterns as their uptake of flexible working arrangements (FWAs) to accommodate family life remained low (Offer & Kaplan, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic was unique in that it pushed men, women, care and work into the home. Homeworking in the UK went up to 46% overall and 69% amongst professional workers, with similar proportions of men and women homeworking (ONS, 2021). UK fathers in dual-earner heterosexual households nearly doubled the time they spent on childcare (Andrew et al., 2020). In 2021, 76% of fathers reported wanting to continue working flexibly post-pandemic (Fatherhood Institute, 2021). Several studies have remarked on the potential of this crisis to shape the gendered cultural norms and attitudes of and around work and caregiving (Chung et al., 2021; Margaria, 2021), yet there has been little systematic theoretical basis for these claims. While previous studies have largely focused on exploring why the low FWA uptake by fathers persisted (Hobson et al., 2011; Hoherz & Bryan, 2020; Kelland, 2022), this paper seeks to shift the focus to exploring how and why the crisis has enabled the change in fathers’ post-pandemic behavioural intentions attitudes. In doing so we contribute to theorising the conditions of possibility that enable and sustain the shift in gendered patterns of flexibility.

To theorise the above, we draw on Sen’s capabilities framework, modified by Hobson et al (2011; 2018) and Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al. (2019). This framework offers the opportunity to shift from analysing the inequality of resources to analysing and understanding the in(ability) of enacting these resources, or the ‘agency gap’ (Hobson, 2011), i.e., why individuals do not feel entitled to request flexible working despite their formal right enshrined in UK legislation to do so. The concept of sense of entitlement is rooted in social justice theory and denotes a set of beliefs and feelings about rights and entitlements, or legitimate expectations, based on what is perceived to be fair and equitable (Lewis & Smithson, 2001), and in the capabilities perspective it is seen as a crucial filter to putting the resources that people have into action.

Drawing on a longitudinal data set of 62 interviews with UK parents with managerial responsibilities, we use the capabilities approach to map the conditions and mechanisms of the Covid crisis that shaped fathers’ sense of entitlement to FWAs. We argue that against the background of changing social attitudes and social and organisational policy, the experiences of extended homeworking strengthened fathers’ sense of entitlement to request and use flexibility.

**Fathers and flexibility**

Pre-pandemic, fathers’ use of FWAs remained consistently lower than that of mothers (Cook et al., 2021; Moran & Koslowski, 2019; Wheatley, 2017). Fathers’ uptake of FWAs as well as the organisational ‘offer’ of flexibility to fathers are also shaped by gendered ideologies of fatherhood, masculinity, and the ‘ideal worker’ norm. As Halford (2006, p.385) puts it, ‘fatherhood has always competed with other elements in the constitution of masculinity, particularly with paid work’. Breadwinning continues to be considered a core aspect of masculinity and ‘good’ fathering (Ranson, 2012). The gendered breadwinner norm remains closely intertwined with the ‘ideal worker’ image; both are strongly aligned with masculinity but not with care (see Atkinson, 2022). Compared to mothers, fathers generally feel ‘less entitled to ask for workplace support for active fatherhood which deviates from notions of organizational masculinities’ (Lewis & Stumbitz, 2017, p.230).

Fathers can incur penalties for noncompliance with gender role expectations when they take on more caregiving responsibility and use FWAs for family needs. Flexibility stigma kicks in with any reduction in working hours and impacts significantly on fathers’ earnings and career opportunities (Burnett et al., 2013; Fuller & Cooke, 2018). Rudman & Mescher (2013) also refer to this as ‘femininity stigma’, as the ideal worker norm is linked to the performance of masculinity and fathers working flexibly for care purposes deviate from both this norm and that of the male breadwinner. This ‘deviance’ can create perceptions of the FWA-using father as being ‘less of a man’ (Williams et al., 2013, p.220). Kelland et al. (2022) show that when requesting FWAs and particularly reduced hours, UK fathers still face significant mistreatment or ‘fatherhood forfeits’ such as being mocked, perceived as idle, and viewed with suspicion by both male and female colleagues. Hence, workplace culture and attitudes related to fathers’ involvement in caregiving is an important barrier for FWA uptake (Birkett & Forbes, 2019; Cook et al., 2021; Moran & Koslowski, 2019).

However, recent literature argues that the sense of entitlement may have been changing in the last decade as the discourses and ideals of ‘fathering’ and family involvement in Western cultures have undergone much transformation (see also Ewald et al., 2020; Gatrell & Cooper, 2016; Lewis & Stumbitz, 2017). Trends toward active and involved fatherhood have been rising in the UK and Global North countries (Atkinson, 2022; Hodkinson & Brooks, 2023; Offer & Kaplan, 2021) and fathers report more desire to be involved and engaged in children’s upbringing (Bataille & Hyland, 2022; Liebig & Kron, 2017). There is some indication that in UK couples where female partners are employed, fathers’ working hours reduce marginally after the birth of a child and when the child is between one and five years (Hoherz & Bryan, 2020).

Multiple studies have discussed the Covid-19 pandemic’s adverse effect on women’s and particularly mothers’ employment, including a higher likelihood of loss of work hours or jobs and increases in caregiving responsibilities and work-family conflict even for those working flexibly (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Andrew et al., 2020; Craig & Churchill, 2021; Fodor et al., 2021; Hipp & Bünning, 2021). Enforced homeworking thus yielded few benefits for women and significant concerns regarding exacerbated gender inequalities. Yet, there was some optimism that fathers’ increased homeworking may have enabled a more equitable distribution of unpaid work between parents, generating the potential to challenge traditional family roles in the longer term (Carli, 2020; Chung et al. 2021; Fodor et al., 2020; Margaria. 2021). A Fatherhood Institute (2021) survey of UK fathers shows that 78% of fathers in two-parent households spent more time with their children during the pandemic and 63% want to continue homeworking to continue being better fathers.

As research shows, the success of any flexible or family-friendly policy “depends on how they are experienced by individual employees, and particularly on the extent to which they enhance feelings of entitlement to support to work in ways that are compatible with family life” (Lewis & Smithson, 2001: 1456; Herman & Lewis, 2012). Post-pandemic, fathers may want to continue working from home, but do they feel entitled to do so – and why? We turn now to the concept of sense of entitlement and how it relates to flexible working.

**Sense of entitlement to flexible working**

The concept of sense of entitlement is rooted in social justice theory and denotes a set of beliefs and feelings about rights and entitlements, or legitimate expectations, based on what is perceived to be fair and equitable (Lewis & Smithson, 2001: 1457). In relation to flexible working, this approach distinguishes between employer supports that are regarded as a right or entitlement, and those that are regarded as favours and may involve sacrifices such as career and/or pay limitations (Herman & Lewis, 2012). The sense of entitlement concept is used to examine how individuals employ a process of social comparison to form expectations based on what is considered normative, reasonable and feasible, and hence fair in specific contexts (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya & Smithson, 2016; Herman & Lewis, 2012; Lewis & Smithson, 2001).

Sense of entitlement is gendered. Traditionally mothers tend to feel more entitled to take up FWAs than fathers, but often accept worse conditions, effectively “buying flexibility” (Herman & Lewis, 2012; Lewis, 1997) and reflecting gendered social ideology and organisational assumptions. Social comparison processes also perpetuate gendered sense of entitlement as fathers are more likely to compare themselves with other fathers (and mothers with other mothers) in shaping their expectations of flexible working as a right (Herman & Lewis, 2012; Lewis & Haas, 2005). Nevertheless, evidence of change was emerging in this respect even prior to the pandemic. For example, Gatrell et al. (2015) note that while fathers in their study were typically characterised by very low sense of entitlement to work–family initiatives, some changes in beliefs were found among contemporary fathers.

Sense of entitlement is also context-dependent. Research to date has predominantly focused on aspects of national contexts such as welfare state regimes, policies and ideologies that contribute in different ways to the gendered sense of entitlement (Lewis & Smithson, 2001; Hobson et al., 2011). The Covid-19 pandemic with its mandated working from home for many workers created a unique context where use of FWAs, especially home-based work, became normative for fathers as well as mothers and were shown to be feasible. This had the potential to challenge gendered social comparisons and gendered expectations. However, to date, the processes involved and the conditions under which any shifts in sense of entitlement may change fathers’ perceptions of what is normative and feasible have not been explored or theorised. In this paper we therefore draw on the capabilities framework to explore in more detail how fathers are able to pursue new goals for working and fathering after the pandemic and what suite of factors are key in changing their behavioural intentions.

**The Capabilities Framework**

The capabilities approach is based on the work of Amartya Sen (1999) and provides a framework for evaluating the freedom that individuals have to pursue goals they consider to be important for their quality of life. By enabling an analysis of the factors that influence an individual’s ability to act, the framework emphasises that freedom to pursue goals is context-specific. There are three core concepts in the capabilities approach set out by Sen (1999) and modified by Hobson and colleagues (2011). *Functionings* are life outcomes that are important to an individual and that are achievable to at least some extent (Miles, 2013). In our study, use of FWAs, work-life balance and quality of family life are all functionings identified by our participants as being outcomes of value to them. *Capabilities* are an individual’s actual, rather than potential, possibilities for achieving their chosen functionings (the outcomes they value) (Hobson, 2011). The third core concept is *agency*, an individual’s “ability to pursue and realize the goals that he values or has reason to value” (Miles, 2013: 1044). Agency is critical in facilitating an individual’s choice and achievement of valued functionings, and is constrained by the resources to which an individual has access.

The degree to which individuals can convert the resources available to them into capabilities for achieving functionings – so, the degree to which individuals have agency – is influenced by conversion factors, which comprise an individual’s capability set. Hobson’s (2011) modified capability set is made up of three categories of conversion factors. The first of these is *individual* conversion factors, which include an individual’s demographic markers (such as gender, age, and ethnicity), human capital, and resources such as income and social support network(s). Second are *institutional* factors, which occupy two levels, that of the state and that of the organization. State-level institutional conversion factors comprise statutory care leave policies and benefits, while organization-level factors include job quality, autonomy and flexibility; organisational culture; the provision of organisational work-life balance supports; and trade union representation. Finally, *societal* factors relate to norms present in the local community and larger society about the roles of men and women as workers and carers. These include norms expressed in the media and public debates.

Prior research has used the sense of entitlement concept to examine how individuals use a process of social comparison to form expectations based on what is considered normative, reasonable and feasible (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya & Smithson, 2016; Herman and Lewis, 2012). In this article, we follow Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al.’s (2019: 851) revised capabilities framework, which positions the sense of entitlement concept as a ‘cognitive filter’ that “shapes a worker’s sense of her/his agency to enact her/his capabilities to achieve the … work-life balance that s/he wants and values.” The overall framework is presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**: Revised capabilities framework (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al., 2019)



In this paper, we pose the following research question: How did pandemic homeworking experiences shape fathers’ sense of entitlement to using flexible work arrangements? To answer this question, we set out the pandemic-impacted conversion factors evidenced by our participants’ accounts that make up their capability sets and influence their sense of entitlement. We focus on participants’ perceptions of what is normative to expect in relation to FWA availability as a result of its widespread use during the Covid-19 pandemic, and we assess how these perceptions create a sense of entitlement to FWAs that enhance participants’ agency and capabilities for achieving their chosen functionings.

**Research methodology**

Our aim was to explore the experiences, perspectives and behaviours of our participants, which were situated in a particular temporal and geographical context. We thus employed a qualitative research design underpinned by a realist ontology, with an interpretivist-constructivist epistemology that reflected our treatment of participants’ language as reflecting their contextually situated realities (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

***Sample***

Our sample was composed of 42 UK-based working parents (22 mothers, 20 fathers) between 30 and 59 years of age. Participants worked in a range of industries and occupations including law, banking, construction, engineering, ICT, agriculture and education. The majority of participants were professionals with managerial responsibilities, and all worked from home during the various lockdowns with between one and four children under the age of 18 in the household. Thirty-six participants identified as white, one as Black and three as mixed race. Five participants were single parents, while the rest lived in two-parent households. Two participants had children with special needs. All participants presented as heterosexual.

***Data collection***

Two waves of semi-structured interviews were conducted by all three researchers, focusing on how participants had managed their work and family responsibilities throughout and between the three UK lockdown periods. For Wave 1, participants were initially recruited through the researchers’ partner Working Families, a UK charity with a database of working parents who had agreed to receive research-related invitations. Eligibility criteria for study participation were limited to 1) being a working parent, and 2) being in the UK during the pandemic. To recruit additional fathers, a second call for participants was later disseminated through the researchers’ social networks (e.g., the Fatherhood Institute) and social media accounts (LinkedIn and Twitter). One year after Wave 1 concluded, we emailed participants to ask for a follow-up interview focusing on any changes in flexible working and future plans since the first interview.

Wave 1 took place between April and July 2021 with all 42 participants, and Wave 2 took place in April and May 2022 with 23 of the Wave 1 participants (10 mothers, 13 fathers). Wave 1 interviews lasted between 40-70 minutes and Wave 2 interviews were on average 30 minutes’ duration. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded and transcribed.

***Analysis***

We employed a reflexive thematic analysis (TA) approach, following Braun and Clarke’s six-phase process (2021, 2022). We used this technique deductively, with the revised capabilities framework providing the lens through which we analysed and interpreted the interview data. However, we did not identify themes in advance predicated upon the capabilities framework; our themes were developed through coding rather than using coding as a means of finding evidence for pre-selected themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Each researcher first read through the transcripts from the interviews they had conducted themselves, sharing notes on the contents with the other two researchers. Following this period of data familiarisation, we engaged in an iterative process of systematic data coding, discussing codes amongst ourselves as we went. We next generated initial themes from the coded data before reviewing these themes and then defining and naming them. Finally, we drafted this paper.

Reflexive TA “emphasises the importance of the researcher’s subjectivity as analytic *resource*, and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation” (Braun & Clarke, 2021: 330). At all stages of data collection and analysis, the researchers reflected on the data and their own process, as well as their positionality. All three researchers are women with caregiving responsibilities for children or grandchildren, and all worked from home during the three UK lockdowns and over the course of the pandemic more generally. Two of the researchers have school-aged children and thus experienced homeschooling during pandemic-related school closures. We therefore had a great deal in common with our research participants, and these similarities helped to give us an ‘insider’ status and build a rapport during the interviews. However, we had to make efforts to ensure we did not project our own perspectives onto our participants and/or assign more weight to data that coincided with our own experiences.

**Findings**

Drawing on the revised capabilities approach, our analysis shows an increase in working fathers’ sense of entitlement to work flexibly following the experience of homeworking during the Covid-19 pandemic. We focus on two main findings related to this enhanced sense of entitlement. The first relates to how fathers’ sense of entitlement was shaped by various conversion factors arising from the pandemic context: individual (greater involvement with children, evidence of homeworking productivity, and family support for fathers working from home), institutional (greater availability of hybrid and homeworking in organizations) and societal (increased visibility of involved fathering and normalisation of working from home). Combined with practical factors such as possession of homeworking equipment following the pandemic experience, changes to UK legislation expanding the right to request flexible working to all employees from Day One of their employment, and increased hybrid and homeworking options being offered by employers, the conversion factors identified in our data set led to changing perceptions of what is normative, reasonable and feasible with regard to fathers working flexibly. The second finding illustrates the strengthening of fathers’ agency and capabilities to work flexibly and achieve work-life balance and a satisfactory quality of family life as an outcome of increased sense of entitlement. The overall revised capabilities framework as applied to our data is presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**: Fathers’ post-pandemic capabilities framework



***Conversion factors shaping sense of entitlement to flexible working***

*Greater involvement with children*

Both mothers and fathers spoke about valuing the time they’d spent with their children while working from home, but the fathers’ accounts were often characterised by an acknowledgement of the contrast between their pre-pandemic and pandemic-era parenting. The fathers in our sample worked full-time hours and those with younger children previously saw very little of them during the working week, with the bulk of childcare performed by mothers. Mandated homeworking enabled (and often required) them to be more involved parents and this translated for many into a stronger relationship with their children. There was a strong drive to maintain these improved relationships by continuing to work flexibly in future.

*[W]orking from home has been really good for feeling like I’m still involved in my son’s life, because if I was going to the office… I miss out on most of his day … I have a really good relationship with him, which I think I wouldn’t have got if I had been working from the office full-time* (Michael, father of one, education)

This period of enforced homeworking triggered for some fathers a re-evaluation of their fathering and decisions to effect changes post-pandemic with a view to improving relationships with their children. The massive change to day-to-day life effected by the closing down of wider society provided a space for fathers to reconsider their expectations and priorities.

*[The pandemic has] made me feel that there’s a need to invest more time in [parenting]... when you’re a parent, I guess you might be emulating or subconsciously acting in the way that you might have been parented. And I’ve got the opportunity and the capacity… to look into that a bit more, change some behaviours for which I feel are the better, and connect and be closer to my son* (Tim, father of one, ICT)

Mothers and fathers also witnessed changes in male colleagues’ and managers’ attitudes toward time spent on work activities. Men whose senior work roles had previously taken them out of the home for the majority of their time came to realise what they had been missing once they began homeworking, and became loath to relinquish this increased time spent with family.

*[W]hat has been interesting is talking to a number of [male] colleagues who haven’t traditionally been that involved in family, aren’t prepared to give it up now that they have dinner with the family every night. So, previously they were the ones, they travelled non-stop, lots of work dinners, lots of those kinds of things. And over the last year they may not have been doing childcare, but they have at least had dinner with their family.* (Heather, mother of one, finance)

*Evidence of homeworking productivity*

Our participants were unanimous in their view that work productivity did not suffer while homeworking. Observing how their organizations continued to function and in many cases flourish during mandated homeworking gave participants confidence in a ‘business case’ argument for requesting the continuation of their flexible working arrangements post-pandemic.

*I know and I can demonstrate that… I’m doing this [work] in the day, and it’s taken this long. And you can physically prove that you’re doing it faster. Therefore, you can do more in the same amount of time. So, I think it’s got pretty concrete data. … Working from home… is a thing, and you can restructure someone’s working week around that.* (Luke, father of one, construction)

There was a sense from participants’ accounts that given positive results from the ‘Great Homeworking Experiment’, the onus has shifted onto employers to make a case for why a return to the worksite is necessary or desirable. Fathers particularly were quick to identify a culture of presenteeism and fear of loss of managerial control as pre-pandemic reasons behind onsite working patterns, and to challenge these rationales as weak.

*I have no intention of ever returning to the office five or even four days a week, frankly. I am no longer prepared, I would say, to sacrifice that time with my family for no other reason than that somebody wants me to be visible in the office. Because I now know, from the past year, that there is no other reason for it because it doesn’t affect my productivity or work output at all.* (Mark, father of one, marketing)

Now that their metaphorical eyes had been opened by the benefits of enforced homeworking for both family life and work productivity, fathers challenged employers to justify any reduction in or withdrawal of flexibility. Perceptions of working from home had shifted over the course of the pandemic and it was now seen as more normative, reasonable and feasible than previously.

*I think it’s made a lot of people realise that you can work from home and be just as effective, maybe even more effective. …a lot of people that perhaps maybe felt obligated to always be in the office. When they were thrown into that situation where they couldn’t go into the office, they’ve now thought why didn’t I do this before? This makes much more sense, it’s much easier for me to work from home* (Adam, father of one, ICT)

*[C]ompanies learn … that remote working is perfectly feasible, and they didn’t say that before the lockdown. Most organisations were against homeworking … basically because of control … and knowing that the people are working all of the hours that they are paid for. [O]bviously people have just had to get over that one now. You can’t say to people that you can’t do it when they’ve made it work.* (Erik, father of two, manager)

*Family support for fathers working from home*

During Wave 2 of the interviews, a number of fathers related that their female partners had returned to, or begun, working onsite and that this arrangement was enabled by fathers continuing to work from home on a regular or full-time basis and thus being available for school drop-offs and pickups and childcare emergencies. In some cases, female partners had previously worked from home in order to be available for school-aged children and perceived working onsite as a valued opportunity. This contrasted sharply with fathers’ views on homeworking, which was perceived as a valued new opportunity rather than a career constraint.

*[M]y wife’s now doing a different role, a different job, which means she typically does four ten-hour shifts during the week and they’re a combination of weekdays and weekends, so when they’re during the week she’s not home till seven, eight o’clock so when the boys get home from school at half-four-ish I’m here… One of the reasons for [my wife] doing the job she now does is… certainly me being a permanent home-worker has helped facilitate that* (Keiron, father of two, marketing)

*Visibility of involved fatherhood*

Working from home during the pandemic made caregiving issues visible in the work space to an unprecedented degree. During Zoom or Microsoft Teams meetings, participants’ homes, pets and children were frequently on display to colleagues, managers and line reports. Both mothers and fathers in our sample reported that this promoted understanding among organizational members regarding the challenges working parents faced during this period, and this spilled over to a greater understanding of parents’ non-work responsibilities more generally.

*[M]y daughter was off [from nursery], and I was in a call. And it was after school hours, and my son was home as well, and they just started having a dinosaur roaring competition with each other next to me, and I was like, oh, I have to mute myself. I was typing away, like, ‘really sorry, there's a dinosaur roaring competition going on, I cannot unmute. It will not add to the discussion’. So, yes, most people are fairly accepting of these things now.* (Steven, father of two, engineering)

Mothers and fathers remarked that this increased awareness of caregiving responsibilities was particularly notable among men in more senior roles, who had little hands-on involvement in raising their own children but were now able to see what other fathers in their organization were dealing with.

*[P]eople in the workplace were very quick to understand, especially men, I would say, who didn’t traditionally... who didn’t do the school pick-up or were slightly from a different generation, they suddenly understand about having the kids at home all the time* (Jay, father of four, consultancy)

The majority of mothers in our sample had always scheduled work around caregiving commitments, but now that family issues were more visible at work in general, fathers too were feeling empowered to openly balance work and childcare. This accompanied an increasing sense of acceptance of non-work commitments, and was something that was not common prior to the pandemic.

*There's quite a few [men] around [the organisation] who have time booked out in their diaries for the school run and things like that. And it's quite an accepted thing that... People accept that you have to do it and that people do have responsibilities outside work.* (Oliver, father of one, auditing)

*Normalisation of working from home*

Participants commented that even in organizations that had previously discouraged working from home, the enforced pandemic homeworking had wrought a change in the acceptability of working offsite. The mandated nature of lockdown homeworking made it normative and had compelled organizations to acknowledge that it was, in fact, feasible.

*I’d say as a firm, frankly, we were a bit old-fashioned about the idea of working from home, and some of the senior management didn’t feel comfortable with the idea that people could be as productive or accessible somewhere else, and obviously people have just had to get over that one now.* (Anna, mother of two, law)

Homeworking was now seen as a reasonable working arrangement due to its ubiquity for knowledge workers over the course of the pandemic. This increased its appeal for workers who had previously been discouraged by unsupportive organizational cultures or fears of negative career repercussions of working flexibly.

*[I]t’s not so much of a taboo subject, or a stigma attached to it, I think it’s become the norm. And now people are much happier to embrace it, whereas people would have always felt maybe I’d like to work from home but I need to be seen in the office.* (Adam, father of one, ICT)

Not all organizations were quick to embrace change. Although participants agreed that their employers now offered more hybrid and homeworking opportunities than was the case pre-pandemic, some remarked that entrenched organizational attitudes about how best to manage workers persisted and hindered culture shift.

*[Line managers] don’t trust people working from home. It's slowly changing, yes. But it’s like a massive tanker. You’ve got to stop it and turn it and change direction.* (Russell, father of one, policing)

***Stronger sense of entitlement, agency and capabilities to work flexibly***

All of the factors delineated above combined to produce a stronger sense of entitlement among fathers to work flexibly, leading to increased agency and capabilities for doing so. This was reflected in participants’ accounts of intentions to request flexibility from employers, which demonstrated shifting attitudes toward parenting as a collective rather than individual responsibility.

*I’ll definitely be more confident to ask for [flexibility]. It’s not good enough, I think historically companies have been like, ‘well, we’ve all got kids, mate, that’s your problem to deal with’, right?* (Tyler, father of two, journalist)

Anecdotal accounts about friends and relatives illustrated changes in working patterns among even fathers who had previously embodied the ‘ideal worker’ norm, prompted by positive experiences with a more involved style of parenting facilitated by homeworking.

*Actually, my brother-in-law has mentioned it and he’s an absolute workaholic and was chained to the office and now he’s been working at home for over a year and he has said, oh I think maybe I’ll see if I could ask for an arrangement so I could pick my son up from school* (Bethany, mother of two, academic)

Some fathers took the initiative to implement flexibility themselves, without making a formal request. While this may be an option only for workers senior enough to not fear reprisals from above, it is notable that it is taking place in sectors historically known for masculine organizational cultures and conservative attitudes toward flexible working, such as finance.

*I've actually put the days when I do the nursery and school stuff, I put that in my calendar now. Hopefully people avoid booking meetings over that time. … At least then people know that I am going to be leaving early* (Adrian, father of two, finance)

All the fathers in our sample save one stated that flexibility would be a dealbreaker when job searching, a view not shared to the same extent by the mothers. A number of fathers were job hunting in either Wave 1 or Wave 2 and spoke about the importance of options for homeworking in securing their interest in a position and their lack of interest in a role that required working onsite full-time. This illustrates a strong sense of entitlement to flexible working that was not present pre-pandemic.

*I’ve been looking at some available jobs and [flexibility] will definitely be something that I’m looking for in a job… I certainly wouldn’t pick a job that meant I had to be in the office all the time and couldn’t work flexibly... Or then if that became apparent halfway through the process - I’d have to say, well, I can’t support that. It’s not what I want to do.* (Adam, father of one, ICT)

Fathers’ perceived agency to insist upon flexible working opportunities in their job search was evident in their accounts, which often evinced disbelief at pre-pandemic working patterns and a determination never to return to them.

*I’ve said to people, can you believe we used to go in five days a week and we just accepted that? Why? I’m interviewing for a job, at the moment … that’s an hour and a half commute for me. So, if they say to me, you’re expected to be in the office five days a week, I’m going to say, no, it’s not for me* (Michael, father of one, education)

In addition to the stated importance of flexibility in job hunting, fathers also referenced flexibility as a key factor impacting retention or turnover in their current roles. This is demonstrated by the quote below from a father who had recently accepted a job offer from an organization located several hours’ drive from his home, on the basis of being able to work from home full-time.

*Having made this shift into permanent homeworker status it’ll be very hard for me to come away from that in any meaningful sense. If there is a commitment or even an expectation of even one day a week in a company location, unless it’s within say half an hour … half an hour’s fine for me, but … [a]ny more than that it would be a serious consideration* (Keiron, father of two, marketing)

**Preliminary discussion and conclusion**

Our paper highlights two key findings from our data. First, we show how fathers’ sense of entitlement was heightened by the normalisation of working from home brought about by lockdown measures instituted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We illustrate how the personal resources of the participants in our study were augmented by institutional and societal forces that expanded the sense of what has become normative and reasonable to expect with regard to working arrangements. One example is how the increased visibility of family members during online work meetings led to greater workplace acceptance and perceived legitimacy of attending to family responsibilities. Another is how extensive experience of working from home during the pandemic has provided clear evidence that personal and organizational productivity can be maintained or improved with this working arrangement, increasing fathers’ bargaining power when negotiating flexibility with their employers.

Secondly, we illustrate how a greater sense of entitlement strengthens fathers’ perceptions of their agency. This results in stronger links between our participants’ resources and their capabilities to achieve their chosen functionings in terms of use of FWAs, work-life balance and quality of family life. This agency is evinced by fathers’ accounts of their refusal to return to the office full-time in their current jobs, their characterisation of flexibility as a ‘dealbreaker’ when seeking new positions or considering job offers, and their willingness to resign from their posts if the flexibility promised to them does not manifest.

We conclude by questioning the extent to which our findings may signal widespread change in redefining men’s family roles and potentially facilitating further behavioural equality in the workplace and society at large. History has shown us that large-scale crises, such as war or economic collapse, can have an immediate transformative effect on gender norms, roles, and patterns of work and care. However, these changes are not always long-lasting (e.g., women’s labour force participation during the Second World War). A unique feature of the Covid-19 pandemic is that compared to previous economic crises that pushed more women into work, this crisis pushed much work and many workers into the home. Whether fathers are able and willing to stay there remains to be seen.

***Limitations***

This is a work in progress and has many limitations in terms of theorising and analysis. We have yet to analyse all of our Wave 2 data, which we expect to provide more compelling evidence of strengthened agency and capabilities to act. We also have yet to fully consider the theoretical and empirical implications of our research. We welcome any and all comments on our work thus far!

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