Work–family lockdown: implications for a post-pandemic research agenda

Gary N. Powell
Department of Management, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to consider the implications of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic for future research on the intersection of gender, work and family.
Design/methodology/approach – This paper offers personal reflections on needed research in a post-pandemic future.
Findings – This paper identifies several promising areas for future research on the intersection of gender, work and family.
Research limitations/implications – The paper offers numerous recommendations for a post-pandemic research agenda, including future research on essential workers, virtual workers, workers with enhanced family demands, single employed parents, social supports and issues of gender associated with these populations and topics.
Social implications – The paper reinforces the value of social supports at the individual, family, organizational, community and societal levels.
Originality/value – The paper discusses implications for future research of an original event, the COVID-19 pandemic, as it is still transpiring.
Keywords Gender, Pandemic, Work–family lockdown, Essential workers, Virtual workers, Social supports
Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction
Writing an article about the implications for future research of a pandemic during a pandemic is an experience I never expected to have. To contextualize this article, my work domain is currently in lockdown mode as ordered by the governor of my state, CT in the USA. I am banned from going to my office unless I have a very good reason to do so that my department head would approve; frankly, I cannot think of any good reason. In addition, my family domain is in lockdown mode as ordered by the governor. I am allowed to go out of my home for exercise, to get groceries and take-out food, and the like, but only if I keep a safe “social distance” from non-household members at all times and wear personal protective equipment in their midst. If I had school-age children, they would be at home full-time because schools have been ordered to close and shift to online instruction for the remainder of the school year (and they would likely be calling for my attention or otherwise distracting me as I write this article). If I had elderly parents who lived in a nursing home, the population at greatest risk, I would be waving at them from outside their window and leaving food or arranging delivery of it on their doorstep (and I would be worried sick about them and struggling to put my worries aside to write this article). Thus, I am experiencing what may be called a work–family lockdown, which significantly affects the nature of the
interface between my work and family roles. My situation may not be unusual compared to that of others, but it is certainly unique in my lifetime.

I am also experiencing these times as a scholar of gender issues in the workplace, work–family issues and the intersection of gender, work and family (Greenhaus and Powell, 2017; Powell, 1999, 2019; Powell and Greenhaus, 2010). As I consider my own experiences and witness or hear about others’ experiences, I am struck by the limitations of our literature. Work–family lockdowns, and the gender issues they raise, have implications for the nature of individuals’ work–family interfaces in a post-pandemic future.

As a new construct in a field that does not suffer from a lack of theoretical constructs (Powell et al., 2019), work–family lockdown may seem fanciful and applicable only to an extreme situation such as a pandemic. We can tinker with the construct as scholars. For example, I believe that it is best viewed as having two continuous and independent dimensions, with individuals’ work and family domains varying in the extent to which they are locked down; as a result, the nature of my work–family lockdown differs from that of others. However, how the construct is defined and applied to the context of the current pandemic is less important than considering its implications for research in a post-pandemic future.

In this article, I consider how individuals’ work–family interface has been affected by its being enacted during a pandemic, how well these effects are addressed in the extant literatures on the intersection of gender, work and family and their implications for post-pandemic research in the field. Although we are encouraged to take a positive perspective in our scholarship (Warren et al., 2019), I have trouble seeing anything positive about the current context; after all, no one signed up for it. Nonetheless, it would be useful if we can learn something from it to guide our future research agenda.

**Essential workers**

A critical distinction between workers that influence the nature of their work–family interface is whether they are designated as “essential” or not by the relevant governing body, i.e. whether they are required to report to work or required to stay home. During a pandemic, essential workers experience a family lockdown but not a work lockdown. They are required to expose themselves every workday to a coronavirus that is looking for human hosts and to the risk of bringing it home to their families. Further, if essential workers choose not to report to work during a pandemic for fear of contracting the disease, they place themselves at risk of losing their jobs and suffering financial hardship.

Essential workers are an under-examined population in work–family research. A methodological review found that two-thirds of work–family studies focused on workers who are managers and professionals (Casper et al., 2007), most of whom would be classified as nonessential; no studies were identified that focused specifically on essential workers. In the medical literature, individual factors have been found to influence essential workers’ willingness to report to work during a pandemic, including the availability of child and elder care (positively related) and family-related obligations (negatively related; Gershon et al., 2010). However, beyond the decision to report to work or not, the work–family interface of essential workers has received little research attention.

During the current pandemic, a majority of essential workers are women, with one-third of all jobs held by women designated as essential (Robertson and Gebeloff, 2020). Female-dominated essential jobs include health care (e.g. nurse and nursing assistant, respiratory therapist), social work (e.g. home health aide checking on an older client) and critical retail jobs (e.g. pharmacists and pharmacy aides, cashiers at grocery stores). Although other types of essential jobs are male-dominated (e.g. transportation, handling of hazardous materials),
the numbers of essential workers in male-dominated jobs are smaller than in female-dominated jobs.

Conceptually, essential workers may be regarded to experience a unique type of work–family conflict, the negative side of the work–family interface. The most widely cited theory of work–family conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985) identified three types: time based, resulting from the finite amount of time available to handle both work and family roles; strain based, resulting when strain in one role spills over into the other role; and behavior based, when incompatible behaviors are required for the two roles. These types of conflict may occur in both directions, work-to-family and family-to-work. During a pandemic, essential workers face the risk of experiencing an additional type of conflict, health-based work-to-family conflict, resulting when ill health derived from the work role spills over into the health of family members.

As anecdotal evidence to support this type of conflict, I turn to the recent experiences of an acquaintance who is a registered nurse in the coronavirus ward of a local hospital. In caring for patients with the virus, she contracted the virus herself, stayed home to receive medical attention for it while fearing that she would pass it along to her husband (i.e. health-based work-to-family conflict) and then went back to work while still experiencing symptoms because she was so concerned about her family’s finances (i.e. strain-based family-to-work conflict because of fear of economic hardship; Schieman and Young, 2011): her holding a black belt in martial arts did not protect her from these types of work–family conflict.

Thus, greater attention to essential workers, who are predominantly female, that incorporates the prospect of their experiencing health-based work-to-family conflict, as well as other types of conflict, financial hardships, and other phenomena that shape the nature of their work–family interface is recommended in a post-pandemic research agenda.

Work lockdown
The numbers of telecommuters, or people who engage in virtual work, have been trending upwards in recent years (Spreitzer et al., 2017). However, during the current pandemic, this trend went into overdrive. During a two-week period in March 2020, because of work lockdowns, the proportion of the US labor force that was working from home increased from 33% to 61% (Harter, 2020). As a result, many workers are working from home who have not done so before.

An unstated assumption in the work–family literature on telecommuting is that telecommuters choose to do so. It helps them to balance work and family by enabling them to better fulfill caregiving and household responsibilities while strengthening family relationships. It also increases their productivity by reducing work interruptions and distractions and enhancing their concentration (Allen et al., 2015).

Telecommuters have always faced challenges in conducting their work. This mode of work blurs the boundary between work and family roles. Because work-related messages may arrive at any time, telecommuters may feel pressured to be working (or appear to be working) around the clock, thereby rendering them “tethered to their work” (Ferguson et al., 2016). Telecommuters also face family interruptions and distractions while working at home. Unless managed well, telecommuting increases the likelihood of work–family conflict in both directions.

Under conditions of family lockdown, telecommuters are likely to face greater challenges. For example, if they have school-age children, they may need to devote time to homeschooling and otherwise keeping their children occupied while still working at the same level as before. If they have a household partner, they may have to deal with the partner’s...
work lockdown, which provides further potential for family interruptions and distractions. Thus, the current pandemic is likely to have increased telecommuters’ family-to-work conflict. However, it has also increased the likelihood of family-to-work enrichment, a positive side of the work-family interface (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). For example, a friend, who is a paralegal, in work lockdown is benefiting from having her college-student son, forced to return home after his university closed down, available for 24/7 tech support.

Being required to telecommute owing to a work lockdown presents additional challenges for workers. Because they have not chosen to do so, new telecommuters may lack the skills needed to make it work, including being able to manage the newly blurred boundary between their work and family roles. They may react negatively to the involuntary aspect of their new mode of work and display lower levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Further, if they supervise the work of others, they may lack the skills needed to manage their subordinates virtually, as well as to manage virtual workers (Graves and Karabayeva, 2020).

Individuals who are required to telecommute to work in their occupation are an under-examined population in work–family research. However, according to anecdotal evidence, one of the effects of work lockdowns during the current pandemic may be that virtual workers will become an increasing population. Many workers who have been forced to work virtually are finding that they like it and would like to continue to do so after the pandemic (Cramer and Zaveri, 2020). Further, some companies whose work lends itself to being conducted virtually (e.g. high-tech companies in which white-collar work is predominant) are finding that the work lockdown is working out well, as many employees who no longer have to deal with long commutes are maintaining and even increasing their productivity (Streitfeld, 2020). Such companies may rethink their strategies about where to have physical locations and where to deploy their human resources, in a company facility or scattered in their homes, following the pandemic (Cutter, 2020). Thus, exploring the implications of the changing magnitude of virtual work, and how to make it work effectively for both employers and employees (Graves and Karabayeva, 2020), may be added to the research agenda for a post-pandemic future.

An increased level in virtual work may influence the nature of gender issues in mixed-gender teams. Gender differences have long been noted in mixed-gender teams that meet face-to-face (Carli and Eagly, 1999); for example, men tend to have more influence than women in mixed-gender teams and are more likely to emerge as informal leaders in teams that have no assigned leader. When team meetings are shifted to online platforms such as Zoom, women may still be interrupted more than men, have their comments ignored compared to those of men and the like just as much as in face-to-face meetings (Gupta, 2020). However, being conducted in a predominantly virtual manner may change the nature of work, including its linkages to gender, in fundamental ways (Graves and Karabayeva, 2020). Thus, the intersection of gender, virtual work and family warrants increased attention in a post-pandemic research agenda.

Family lockdown

The gendered division of unpaid domestic labor, with women performing or being responsible for most of the housework, has been an enduring feature of heterosexual households (Breen and Cooke, 2005; Warren, 2011), even when women earn more than their male partners (Lyonette and Crompton, 2015). During the current pandemic, family responsibilities have increased for parents of school-age children as schools have closed and shifted to online instruction. Home schooling or assisting children with distance learning has become the primary mode of childhood education during family lockdown (Miller, 2020).
Theoretically, having both parents working at home during a family lockdown provides the opportunity for a more equitable (i.e. less gendered) division of household labor in dual-career, heterosexual households. Whether this opportunity has been realized depends on which parent is asked. When surveyed during the current pandemic about whether they or their spouse were spending more time in home schooling, 45% of men versus 80% of women said they were spending more time than their spouse; few reported that they and their spouse were devoting equal time to home schooling (Miller, 2020). As anecdotal evidence, a colleague reports that some of her female friends are struggling with having to work at home while simultaneously minding their children (i.e. experiencing time-based and strain-based work–family conflict), whereas their husbands are working normally except now at home; one wonders how the husbands would respond.

Family lockdowns increase the potential for family-to-work conflict. If children require parental attention while both parents are working at home, whose work is likely to be prioritized and whose is likely to be interrupted or put off? Medina and Lerer (2020) suggested an answer, “Mom’s Zoom meeting is the one that has to wait.” Gender inequalities in the division of unpaid domestic labor may not have diminished during conditions of family lockdown. However, a future increase in the prevalence of virtual work for one or both parents may change the nature of their work–family interface by increasing experiences of family-to-work conflict, with women’s conflict likely to be greater than that of men. Thus, stability and change in the gendered nature of family dynamics will warrant attention in a post-pandemic research agenda.

Single employed parents, most of whom are women, experience especially difficult times during a family lockdown. They experience high work-to-family conflict during normal circumstances, because they provide sole financial support for their families while handling family responsibilities (Minnotte, 2012). If they are nonessential workers in a work lockdown, they face especially high family-to-work conflict resulting from increased family demands in what has become their workplace and their home. Single parents are an under-examined population in work–family research (Casper et al., 2007; Minnotte, 2012). Their experiences of the work–family interface warrant increased attention in a post-pandemic research agenda.

Social supports
Social support, a critical ingredient in the work–family interface (Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1994), may be provided by individuals, families, organizations, communities and societies. For example, support received in one’s family role for participation in work activities is associated with lower family-to-work conflict and an enhanced sense of well-being and satisfaction with the family (Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1994). In the same vein, support received in one’s work role from a family-supportive supervisor or organizational culture (Greenhaus and Powell, 2017) may help to alleviate work demands or provide flexibility in meeting these demands, thereby reducing work-to-family conflict and enhancing an employee’s well-being and loyalty to the organization. As anecdotal evidence, a colleague in the publishing industry recently told me that she feels lucky to work for a company that cares deeply about its employees and offers considerable flexibility in working arrangements and hours. This has made a huge difference during the pandemic for employees with young or older children, care responsibilities, health issues and the like. She has always been proud of her company, but she has never been prouder than she is now. Her experiences and reactions to it vividly demonstrate the value of support at the organizational level.
During the current pandemic, social support at the individual level has not diminished, but the ways in which it may be exchanged have been altered. Giving and receiving support in person is risky and banned for many during family lockdown. However, support delivered virtually is not the same as support delivered in close proximity; virtual hugs yield less benefits for mental and physical health than physical hugs (Olson, 2020). The psychological effects of social distancing, including the anguish it causes by keeping people physically apart (Azarian, 2020), reinforce the value of social support at the individual level.

The current pandemic has demonstrated the value of targeted supports at the societal level, including public supports for child and elder care (which offer greater relief for women than men given the gendered division of unpaid domestic labor; Breen and Cooke, 2005), unemployment benefits (which offer greater relief for women than men given their higher unemployment rate; Jones, 2020) and the like. At the community level, as so many people have lost their jobs or otherwise suffered financial setbacks, the importance of food banks and shelters for the homeless cannot be understated. Thus, examining the effects of social supports and the costs and consequences of different types of supports at all levels should be an important part of a post-pandemic research agenda.

Conclusion
In conclusion, this article offers numerous recommendations for a post-pandemic research agenda, including future research on essential workers, virtual workers, workers with enhanced family demands, single employed parents, social supports, and issues of gender associated with these populations and topics. Although I hope that I am never called upon again to write about the implications for future research of a pandemic during a pandemic, I also hope that we learn as individuals, family members, employees citizens and scholars from our recent experiences with one. Finally, I look forward to the end of my own work–family lockdown.

References


**Corresponding author**
Gary N. Powell can be contacted at: gary.powell@uconn.edu

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: [www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com