

Work-family strategies during COVID-19: Examining gender dynamics among dual-earner couples with young children ^[1]

Author: Shockley, K. M., Clark, M. A., Dodd, H., & King, E. B

Source: Journal of Applied Psychology

Format: Article

Publication Date: 12 Jan 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Access article [PDF] ^[3]

Excerpted from abstract and introduction

There are several existing typologies of dual-earner couples focused on how they dually manage work and family; however, these all assume that couples can outsource childcare during normal work hours and that work is largely conducted outside of the home. Early attempts to control COVID-19 altered these assumptions with daycares/schools closing and the heavy shift to remote work. This calls into question whether couples tended to fall back on familiar gendered patterns to manage work and family, or if they adopted new strategies for the unique pandemic situation. We addressed this question using a sample of 274 dual-earner couples with young children. We content coded couples' qualitative responses about their plans for managing childcare and work commitments and used these codes in a latent class analysis to identify subgroups. Seven classes were identified, with 36.6% of the sample using strategies where women did most or all childcare, 18.9% of the sample using strategies that were not clearly gendered or egalitarian, and 44.5% of the sample using unique egalitarian strategies. We also obtained data from 133 of these couples approximately 7 weeks later regarding their well-being and job performance. Results suggested that women in the Remote Wife Does It All class had the lowest well-being and performance. There were nuanced differences between the egalitarian strategies in their relationships with outcomes, with the Alternating Days egalitarian category emerging as the overall strategy that best preserved wives' and husbands' well-being while allowing both to maintain adequate job performance.

Researchers have noted several typologies of broad strategies that dual-earner couples use to generally manage work and family (e.g., Hall & MacDermid, 2009; Masterson & Hoobler, 2015; Sweet & Moen, 2006). There are nuanced differences across these typologies, but a common trend is that the most prevalent strategies involve some form of a "neo-traditional" division of labor, where women are primary caretakers inside the home and take on disproportionately more childcare and men work primarily outside the home and their careers are prioritized. This research also assumes that dual-earner couples have the option to outsource childcare during normal work hours and that work is largely conducted outside of the home.

The early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States introduced an unprecedented context that altered these assumptions. Specifically, institutional and governmental reactions to control the pandemic included the closing of most childcare centers and in-person schools. This sudden substantial increase in childcare responsibilities for dual-earner couples was not necessarily balanced by a reduction in work responsibilities; couples were together confronted with the immediate and ongoing need to simultaneously fulfill both work and childcare roles. That is, the division of childcare labor was no longer confined to hours outside of the typical workday, and the boundaries between work and home became blurred for many. Additionally, with the heavy shift to remote work (Hickman & Saad, 2020), men were much more physically present in the home than ever before. Physical proximity, and the associated increased salience of family demands, had the potential to markedly shift traditional gendered patterns of behavior.

Despite anecdotal discussion of gendered strategies in the popular press (e.g., Charlton, 2020; Cohen & Hsu, 2020; Smith, 2020), there are no known empirical tests of what strategies couples are actually using to manage childcare during COVID-19. As such, we do not have knowledge of whether these strategies are highly gendered (as tended to be the case pre-COVID-19) or if new, more egalitarian strategies are being adopted in light of the unique context. Based on these ideas, the goal of the present study was to address the question of whether, in the COVID-19 context, couples are creating novel work-family (WF) management strategies that transcend gender roles or if they are falling back on the familiar patterns seen in previous research during "typical" times. Importantly, we further examined the relationship of these strategies with men and women's job performance and well-being (including health and family functioning). We addressed these questions in a sample of dual-earner heterosexual couples with young children (under age 6) who had stable childcare arrangements pre-COVID-19 but whose childcare arrangements were subsequently disrupted. We surveyed them the week that childcare arrangements were largely suspended across the United States and 6.5–8.5 weeks later to assess outcomes.

Our research makes several important contributions to the literature. First, in providing basic information about couples' WF management strategies during the pandemic and how these strategies link to key outcomes, we hope to answer calls to examine WF situations in times of crisis (Eby et al., 2015) and to contribute to the literature about best practices during such times. The COVID-19

pandemic can be considered a crisis situation, defined as a “low-probability, high impact event” that is characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty regarding means of resolution, and significant consequences (Yu et al., 2008). Given the crisis context, one cannot assume prior typologies of couples’ WF management strategies would mirror current findings. Crisis situations may have discontinuous effects on individuals and couples (Eby et al., 2015) and reveal new, complex associations between division of labor and outcomes. If we find that certain strategies are better in this crisis situation than others for well-being and performance, couples may gain insight into how they may adjust their own strategies moving forward during the pandemic, in other crisis situations in the future (e.g., natural disasters), or even in more minor situations once COVID-19 has subsided (e.g., child is sick for a few days and must stay home).

Second, our study empirically answers anecdotal questions about gender and childcare during the pandemic. By examining the gender dynamics within couples’ WF management strategies, we provide important evidence that has implications for understanding (a) potential downstream career consequences for men and women and (b) the extent to which the gendered separate spheres of work and home are fixed versus adaptive to crisis. With regard to the former point, if women take on the bulk of childcare duties during the pandemic, this could be a leading indicator of backtracking in women’s progression in organizations. With regard to the latter point, understanding what happens when work and home are in the same sphere for both men and women offers a unique lens into the malleability of the gendered division of household labor.

A third contribution of our study is linking dual-earner WF management strategies to well-being and performance outcomes. There is a surprising dearth of research on this topic generally. Although we focus on short-term implications in the context of a pandemic, our findings may be able to guide research outside the pandemic as well (e.g., short-term relationship tension stemming from a particular WF management strategy may manifest in more stable attitudes such as marital dissatisfaction if that strategy is adopted long-term). Furthermore, short-term implications are important in their own right as they can have meaningful downstream effects on individual well-being (e.g., lack of sleep has been linked to obesity, hypertension, and diabetes; Altman et al., 2012), relationship outcomes (e.g., tension from this situation may simmer and resentment may build between spouses), and workplace outcomes (e.g., companies may use the current situation to make long-term decisions such as promotions or raises).

Related link: Has the pandemic shifted traditional gender roles in childcare? ^[4]

Region: United States ^[5]

Tags: division of labour ^[6]

gender ^[7]

COVID-19 ^[8]

Source URL (modified on 26 Jan 2021): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/21/01/work-family-strategies-during-covid-19-examining-gender>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/21/01/work-family-strategies-during-covid-19-examining-gender> ^[2]
<https://doi.apa.org/fulltext/2020-82355-001.html#s16> ^[3] <https://doi.apa.org/fulltext/2020-82355-001.pdf> ^[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/01/has-pandemic-shifted-traditional-gender-roles-childcare> ^[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> ^[6]
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/division-labour> ^[7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/gender> ^[8]
<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9040>