

Mothers and Workers in the Time of COVID-19: Negotiating Motherhood within Smart Working

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Abstract

The article is an autoethnographic account written by three Italian academic researchers and mothers with children of different ages. The authors engage in a reflection starting with their experience as working women committed to the work–family negotiation process while facing the COVID-19 health emergency that has affected the whole world. This article focuses on how we, as middle-class, heterosexual, white mothers working in a privileged employment context during the period of the pandemic lockdown, negotiated the complex mother and worker roles, balancing work and family time while smart working (teleworking from home). We start with a reflection on the use of autoethnography as a research tool and then propose an analysis of work–family balance strategies in an anomalous situation, such as that of the lockdown, highlighting the tensions in gender roles within dual-career families.

Keywords

COVID-19, autoethnography, family negotiation, smart working

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Introduction

This is an autoethnographic article written by three authors, each a working mother with children of different ages (from 4 to 21 years). We are three associate professors in tenure track positions in medium-sized universities, we belong to three different disciplines (anthropology, psychology, and sociology) and we have often collaborated on common research projects.

F.: I am 44 years old, and I have been working for approximately 20 years at the university in the city where I studied and where my family lives. I am married and the mother of two children, a 4-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl during the lockdown. My husband G., a computer scientist, teleworked from home even before the lockdown, periodically going to a large city approximately two hours away by car, where his company is located.

N.: I am 47 years old and for approximately 20 years I have been working at the university in the city where I studied and where I live with my family. I'm the mother of two preteens aged 10 and 13, and my husband, a freelancer, often worked at home before the lockdown, alternating days in the office or at companies. During the lockdown, his business almost completely stopped, having a significant impact on the management of household and childcare activities.

R.: I'm 55 years old and I have been working at a university in a city other than the one where I live for approximately 20 years, so I am a commuter professor. Before the pandemic, I worked away from home in another city for two to three days a week. I am married to G., an architect employed in public administration. I have a 21-year-old son enrolled in the second year of university. Before the lockdown, my son was at the university in the morning until the early afternoon and almost always had lunch out. From a professional point of view—hours and type of work—the lockdown period became more tiring; my husband continued to leave home at eight in the morning, but often, about twice a week, he returned later than the usual time of 6 pm because he stopped to do the shopping. Furthermore, the volume of work doubled because some older colleagues were teleworking from home, and his responsibilities increased.

The points that unite us are being mothers and university employees. In the last period, we conducted research and wrote articles on the pandemic in Italy. From this experience, the idea was born to reflect on the impact that the lockdown has had on our personal life experiences as scholars and mothers.

We will now present the autoethnography on the work–family negotiation process that we encountered following the COVID-19 health emergency that has impacted the entire world. The focus of this article is how we, as middle-class, heterosexual, white mothers working in a privileged context, faced the

COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and how we negotiated the complex roles of mothers and workers, balancing work and family time during the experience of smart working¹ that involved moving academic activities at home through teleworking. The intellectual and practical resources at stake in dealing with different problems in the management of the lockdown were largely dependent on the age of our children, which required different commitments to care, as well as on the relationship with our partners and the organization of work and domestic work, and on domestic spaces and smart working. To carry out the research project, we met remotely in the evening twice a week to avoid affecting family management. This also helped reduce the anxieties and fears of the moment we were living in, as meetings inevitably crossed into our work and our studies. Our shifting, multiple and sometimes contradictory subjectivities as mothers, wives, and researchers often led us to discuss the topics we wanted to propose in a research project at a national level, but which inescapably intersected with our daily lives as working women with children.

Although plenty is written on women's work-life balance (Naldini and Saraceno 2011; Nyman, Reinikainen, and Eriksson 2018; Pedrini et al. 2013; Todesco 2013) and in academia (Huopalainen and Satama 2019; Toffoletti and Starr, 2016), this is one of the first works that focus on a very particular historical period, paying attention to the strengths, criticalities, and challenges of smart working during a critical time that has upset the working, emotional and life routines of each of us.

The pandemic has unveiled the way in which forms, ways and times of work enter the process of subjectivation and construction of identities. This produces contradictions, conflicts, and shadows. It has also aroused introspective postures that, starting from a reflection on oneself and one's life, have made it possible to probe these dynamics in depth. In this way, they have become opportunities to explore new ways of interpreting work and the profession and, starting from this, to redesign new family relationships and personal identities.

The article first explores the literature on work-family balance before using it to analyze our autoethnographic account of the COVID-19 pandemic period. In our analysis, we make connections between our personal experiences and existing research in the field of smart working, organization, and women's family-work studies. We highlight the complexity of the lived experience and provide an understanding of smart working with its criticality and potential that can be integrated within a balance between the time taken to care for children and the family and the time working that took place in the same domestic spaces during the lockdown, erasing times and spaces previously dedicated to distinct activities.

The methodology chosen is that of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2013), which, starting from the analysis of the similarities and differences in their own life stories, allows us to deeply understand aspects that are often in the shadows of individual lives as well as of society. In the pandemic situation that implemented a total lockdown in which people were forced to stay at home, the two areas (individual life and society) have become even more interrelated and have made it possible to explore unexpected folds of social life and domesticity (Grilli and Meloni 2020). As Poulos claims, autoethnography produces stories that are “drawn from the shadowy, liminal spaces of human life (. . .) and then places within a framework of contemporary everyday life” (Poulos 2009, 17).

Putting the focus of reflection on the shadows, on the unspoken, on the most intimate folds of one’s life and everyday life at the center of the research practice allows you to bring to light new “meanings of the stories in relation to their sociocultural contexts” (Chang et al. 2013, 17). In our case, the positioning of research from below, within our own lives, has been enriched by the set of reflections that were born and followed the processes in progress and the tortuous developments of our distressed and crushed daily lives by the course of the pandemic. Each of us was also able to question our own life through the questions of the others. The possibility of intertwining different disciplinary knowledge also greatly enhanced the reflection on what was happening and led to different questions that traced different lines of thought.

Context of the Study

Several contextual factors influence how we have negotiated motherhood and jobs across time and family spaces through smart working imposed by the coronavirus. We present our lived experiences as mothers and researchers working in academia in Italy, a country strongly affected by the coronavirus. It was the first nation to adopt stringent measures with respect to freedom of movement, and it was the first in Europe to resort to lockdown. Indeed, from the second half of February 2020, the number of Italians infected increased; therefore, on February 21, the Italian government applied restrictive lockdown measures in some regions, which were extended to the entire country on March 9 (Italian Government 2020). The restrictive measures adopted to safeguard public health included closing schools, universities, churches, and shops selling nonessential products, as well as canceling sporting events and other events that involved gathering of people. Therefore, a unique situation began for Italian families that had never been experienced up to that moment (Parisi et al. 2021). You could leave your homes only for essential reasons: food supplies, health, or special jobs. All families saw their daily life upset

and students and teachers experimented with distance learning. Smart working was implemented for many workers.

The space of the house, therefore, has become, for many, the place of study, work, and entertainment, overlapping with care, pleasure and work, which was not easy to manage. The educational role has become the exclusive responsibility of parents after school, and extracurricular and sports educational services were no longer provided. When these services were available, such as in the case of distance learning, they were not always continuous or provided synchronously.

Furthermore, the management of the home, children, and work has brought an overload factor to the parenting role that no longer had external support, adding to the psychological impact on parental figures and leading to inevitable repercussions for family and children's well-being (Migliorini, Rania, and Cardinali 2015; Rania et al. 2020; Spinelli et al. 2020; Žnidaršič and Bernik 2021), especially in situations already marked by children's health difficulties (Cardinali, Migliorini, and Rania 2019).

Autoethnographic Approach and Methodological Reflection

The methodological approach that we have followed is autoethnographic, which comes from a collaboration between the three researchers, so we go back specifically to a CAE (Chang et al. 2013). Liggins, Kearns, and Adams (2013) claimed that autoethnography is a methodology that allows us to connect personal experiences to cultural processes, leading to a depth of understanding regarding the theme studied. For us three, autoethnography represented a reflexive critical practice that produced insights in the following report. This approach to research and writing allowed us to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) our personal experiences (auto) to understand cultural experiences (ethno) (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010; Gariglio 2018; Holman Jones, Adams, Ellis 2016; Rania 2019). The autoethnography approach questions our neutral role as researchers (in fact, we produce, analyze, and reflect simultaneously on the research material) (Karra and Phillips 2008). By canceling the difference between researcher and participant, it allows us to reflect on this relationship, "because AE enables individuals to occupy both researcher and participant perspectives simultaneously, a rich internal dialog develops" (Chang et al. 2013, 23). Our subjectivities and points of view create knowledge more deeply, involving readers emotionally and scientifically. Furthermore, with this method, the effort of sharing our private experiences with a wider audience is an important critical aspect

(Huopalainen and Satama 2019; Marzano 1999, 2001; Porschitz and Siler 2017).

The reliability, validity, and generalizability of an autoethnography are in the self-recognition of the material by the readers (Ellis et al. 2010). This self-recognition capacity of the reader is born by writing in the first person, which involves the reader more emotionally, allowing them to enter into the emotive world of the researcher and the issues presented (Zibricky 2014). This autobiographical article is also an attempt to transcend the discomfort and suffering produced by the pandemic through a self-reflective commitment; in this sense, the autobiographical gaze constitutes a form of self-care that, as the literature on the subject has shown, every autobiography involves (Benelli 2006; Demetrio 1996).

Since we have all been involved for over three months in a collective discussion of the themes that emerged in the comparison between differences and similarities of our three stories, the AE has defined itself as a true CAE that has produced the construction of a community in which the knowledge is coconstructed in a democratic and ethical way (Hernandez, Chang, and Ngunjiri 2017). Each of us contributed “to the collective work in her distinct and independent voice. (. . .) the combination of multiple voices to interrogate a social phenomenon creates a unique synergy and harmony that autoethnographers cannot attain in isolation” (Chang et al. 2013, 24).

The decision to start from the CAE by sharing experiences allows us to carry out a retelling of the in-crisis reality that presents a strong disconnection between the general scenario of the global history in which we are immersed, connecting the lives of each of us at every latitude of the globe in the destiny of the tragic pandemic that has never been seen before, especially in terms of the concrete and intimate fragmented lives that took place in closed-in houses.

The “grand récit”, which the postmodern turn had relegated to the margins of social interpretation, imposes itself with tragic arrogance through the spread of the lethal virus; at the same time, the existences encapsulated in separate, distanced and strongly mediatized lives risk not finding narrative connections with the plan of general historical events and thus implode into fragmented narratives of the individual’s daily pandemic experience. The autobiographical pact mentioned by Lejeune (1975), even before being in a pact of truth with the reader, is a pact that, as Fanelli (2019) says, we could define as “between the people in dialog as the very condition of dialog” with the awareness of turning to “a historical community” capable of sharing this experience both in the dimension of concreteness and in the emotional tone. In this sense, the community produced by the CAE goes beyond the

researchers involved in research and connects to the wider historical community that shared the experience of the pandemic.

The autoethnographic material presented in this article was gathered during the lockdown period from personal diaries and verbalizations of our discussions and reflections during our evening meetings based on data or situations that happened inside or outside our home. The meetings took place once or twice a week and lasted for approximately 2 hours for 12 weeks. We thought about the research to be carried out during the lockdown period, the best methodologies to be used, the relevant social issues to be explored, and the efforts that women (and we women) faced to reconcile the time for care and work in general and during this historical period. They took place in our homes, often with children playing and bursting into our rooms. We connected through technologies, sometimes with formal wear for work, sometimes with informal, unkempt clothes due to the long and demanding days we faced, both from a working and emotional family point of view. The construction of our shared story is complex and requires much reflection and critical analysis. Therefore, the process developed was interactive. What we propose below is a presentation in paragraphs on the main themes that emerged from our CAE reflections, integrated and supported by theoretical insights on the main constructs that emerged. The interactive and negotiated process of our three different positions, also linked to moments of the family life cycle that we were experiencing and our different disciplinary peculiarities, led to the integration of the in-depth analysis illustrated below. The anthropological, psychological, and sociological gazes were integrated from both theoretical and experiential points of view.

We are aware that our gaze is purely gendered; however, our perspective can help us read the hardships that mothers face daily in heterosexual relationships and that we have experienced most during the lockdown, as many studies have shown (Alon et al. 2020; Del Boca et al. 2020; Lagomarsino et al. 2020). Although we are aware that our gaze is based on our experiences, albeit supported by reference theories, we must be very cautious in generalizing our reflections. However, what we will outline provides interesting insights into women's lives during the Italian lockdown.

Complicity and Intimacy as an Autoreflexive Relationship

For many months, all three of us maintained an intense long-distance relationship, exchanging ideas, emotional closeness, and sharing moments of joy and difficulty. Our lives have gradually oriented our vision to the reality that

we were investigating, producing a theoretical and emotional short-circuit from which to start reflecting on lives transformed by the new sociohealth rules (i.e., distancing and using masks) in a pandemic. The daily contexts in which we were distant from each other and enclosed in our three homes constituted a single field to exercise our self-reflection, starting from the complicity and intimacy gained during the long months of virtual meetings. The two key concepts of the anthropological debate on ethnographic research have become the conditions. This is not so much for the anthropologist and researcher to enter the scene and their stay in the field but for the *mise en scène* of a self-reflection on one's own life. Starting from the famous story of the *Cockfight in Bali* (Geertz 1973), the theme of complicity imposes itself in the reflection of field research as an answer to the many questions and limits of the idea of relationships associated with the theme of empathy as a key to access the ethnographic field, which, in our case, coincides with that of our daily lives. In this article, complicity refers to the relationship between the three researchers but also to the dynamics between the members of the single families subject to self-reflection. Normally, complicity is understood as a figure that transforms the stranger into an insider where circumstances establish solidarity that allows the anthropologist to immerse himself in the physical, symbolic world and produce a deep understanding. In our case, it was not a question of transforming strangers into insiders but of rethinking the insiders to understand them in the research space.

Ultimately, complicity is a fundamental level for conducting research that allows us to build levels of "intimacy" so as to penetrate the dynamics of the daily relationships of subjects met in the field (Hertzfeld 1997) or of the "forms of shared social familiarity" (Palumbo 2018). In this article, complicity has served to put intimacy, which already exists, between the subjects in the field into a new perspective. Intimacy has become part of the object of reflection. What happens when the two conditions refer not to the relationship between anthropologists and subjects met in the field but to the relationship established between the researchers involved in the research? The question arises since the autobiography produced involves not a single subject but a group of three researchers who collectively reflect on their family life in a pandemic period. Complicity and intimacy have become two figures necessary to mutually share the lives of others through the story and self-representation that each produced, without having to resort to the fiction of the insider. Each of us has become the "markers of" outsideness "of the life of others necessary to produce an ethically oriented self-reflection."

Mothers and Workers: When the Double Role is a Challenge to be Balanced within the Family

In recent decades, the family has undergone profound transformations, especially regarding the roles between partners in the care and management of children (Grilli 2019; Lee et al. 2014; Mathieu and Gourarier 2016; Ruspini 2011; Satta, Magaraggia, and Camozzi 2020). According to Lamb (2010), there is a greater sharing of childcare between fathers and mothers in Western industrialized cultures. Furthermore, the literature highlights the presence of more participatory forms of parenthood in which fathers seem to be more involved in the care of children, mostly in playful, recreational, and movement activities (Alby and Di Pede 2014; Barbeta Viñas 2019; Craig, Powell, and Smyth 2014; Bosoni, Crespi and Ruspini 2016). However, despite the greater involvement of fathers, mothers are engaged in the tasks of managing the various family activities; in particular, childcare and domestic work remain mainly female tasks (Carriero and Todesco 2016; Cunha et al. 2016; Lasio 2011; Tanturri and Mencarini 2009).

Dual-career families, in which mothers also carry out a paid activity outside the home while juggling work, family and demanding and complex challenges, often resort to outside help to assist with the various tasks and to carry out work and family projects. Therefore, the effort to reconcile work and family is certainly one of the most complex challenges, especially when there is a lack of adequate public services to support families (Del Boca and Rosina 2009; León and Migliavacca 2013; Naldini 2003). In the literature, the theme of conciliation focuses on the difficulty of managing family life with that of work (Del Boca and Rosina 2009; Saraceno and Naldini 2013), even if it is not obviously attributable only to this aspect but also to the complexity and management of roles within the parental couple (Ghislieri and Colombo 2014). Musick, Meier, and Flood (2016) highlight how the balance between the role of mothers and the role of employees is more difficult to manage, as mothers are more exposed to intensive parenting.

A dimension that produces many contradictions involves the parent–child relationship, the processes of construction of female identity and relationships with the partner. These contradictions were analyzed by a group of four researchers through the CAE research method (Geist-Martin et al. 2010).

In our case, CAE did not serve to reflect on differences and similarities in order to bring out profound aspects of our way of performing images and models of motherhood and to critically rethink them in the light of feminist theories, rather it served to critically rethink our way of interpreting parenting in relation to our way of interpreting our identity as knowledge workers, in a forced condition of transformation of the forms of work, specifically

teleworking from home. Furthermore, the issue of balance, although present in all families, is quite salient in some phases of the family life cycle, such as the transition to parenthood and families with small children (Bianchi and Milkie 2010; Martinengo, Jacob, and Hill 2010; Villa and Ciccarelli 2015). Although conciliation is a question that falls back predominantly on females, the greater participation of fathers in their children's lives leads them to a new work–family conciliation much more significant than in the past (Kaufman 2013). It has recently been highlighted that both women and men, when both works, have the same problems regarding the conciliation of work and family life. However, it is more often women who modify aspects of their work to better balance work with the needs of childcare (Istat, February 2020). Furthermore, regarding the activities carried out inside the home, it emerges in the literature that as the level of education between partners increases, women reduce the time dedicated to domestic activities, while men increase it (Menniti and Demurtas 2012). Families with higher incomes tend to spend less time on domestic work because they tend to outsource this activity (Farvaque 2013; Kofman et al. 2000; Sarti 2006) and the care of small children (Farvaque 2013; Lagomarsino 2004; Todesco 2013). These conciliation strategies in high-income families can be functional for reducing the conflict within the couple with respect to the division of domestic or care tasks or the reorganization of these roles in a model of greater sharing (Kofman et al. 2000; Treas and de Ruijter 2008). Furthermore, covering the role of parent and the role of worker (therefore being a mother and a worker or a father and a worker) leads to work–family enrichment so that the experience of a mother or a father can improve parenting quality, and vice versa (Ghislieri and Colombo 2014), impacting both the individual and family well-being.

However, the literature highlights how the difficulties of conciliation can negatively impact the couple's relationship by triggering tensions and conflicts between partners (Cooklin et al. 2015; Dinh et al. 2017; Ruppanner 2010). According to a recent study (Matthews, Wayne and Ford 2014), the conflict between work and family is a stressor that leads to a decrease in the well-being of all family members. Therefore, the conflict between the roles played mainly by mothers is an important dimension to analyze, with implications for psychological and physical health (Koura et al. 2017).

Our Families and the Transformation of Domestic Spaces during the Lockdown

As we have already explained, each of us is in a different family situation due to our partner's work situation and family composition: the age of the children varies from 4 to 21 years, involving young children and adults with

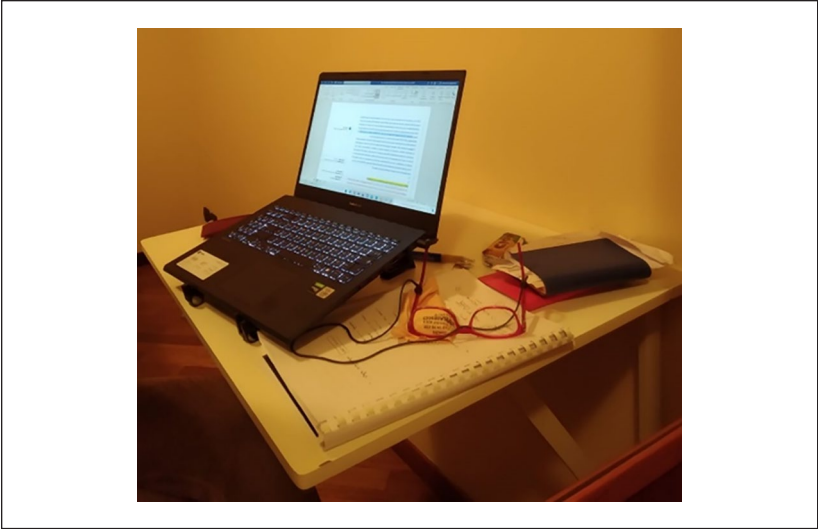


Figure 1. The corner of my bedroom used as an office.

different needs regarding both the involvement in family life and the care needs. For all of us to reconcile the dual role of mother and worker during the lockdown period was not easy, even if the characteristics of our work, in particular the flexibility of our schedules, have somehow allowed us to reconcile it better than others.

However, while the possibility of working even at unusual times (such as late at night or early in the morning) allowed us to take care of the children at home, it had implications related to physical fatigue, stress, and complexity in managing the arrangements. We all found ourselves working at home and from home, first having to manage the reorganization of the spaces normally dedicated to other functions (see Figure 1) and then improvised into emergency studios (Hernández Cordero and Gonzales Granado 2020).

In fact, it had become essential to create environments dedicated to working that, unlike before, now forcefully entered our families' lives:

This morning at 6 o'clock, I was already awake, I was very anxious about how to organize the spaces. My husband and I work from home full-time, and my kids (4 and 6 years old) do online classes. Yesterday the teachers of my daughter, who is in first grade, wrote a message for the start of the lessons saying that it is important that every child has his own space to learn without interruptions, and possibly a desk all to themselves, alone in a room. Luckily,

we have a big house. I'm thinking of transforming the closet room (where we usually put things in bulk and keep the drying racks for the laundry when it rains) into a studio but we should buy a desk, and equip it, how anxious (from F's diary, March 20, 2020);

A corner of my bedroom today has been quickly used as an office during the hours of the day. The kitchen will become the office at night so as not to disturb those who sleep since the hours of the day are not sufficient for the preparation of the lessons of a new course that I have to teach this year, and of all the other activities I have to do during the day (from N.'s diary, March 26, 2020);

Today is the time to think about where to put my work place. How hard it is to find a private corner of the house to concentrate on work. Commuting had never led me to fully become aware of the narrowness of the spaces of a small city apartment without a study. I have a desk in the bedroom, but it seems inappropriate to me. I do not like connecting with other colleagues and teaching in such an intimate and private space. In the end, I opted for the dining room/living room to give a lesson. It seemed to me that it had the most appropriate and less intimate background to be shown outside. The absence of my husband all day and the fact that my son spent a lot of time at home led me to think that choosing the living room did not harm anyone. (from R.'s diary, April 12, 2020).

Our choices of spaces on where to work became the subject of discussion in a remote meeting on April 20, 2020: N: "I will use the bedroom during the day, it is an intimate place in the house that makes me see the people I have to work with. Uncomfortable, but I have learned to solve this situation by using a neutral background so that no one can recognize where I am." R: "Today, I asked my son why he is in his room all day. He replied: 'I'm afraid to disturb your work, I never know if you are connected, if I can make noise, if I can talk.' The answer pained me a lot because I realized that I actually 'locked' my son in his room and that much of the day, he did not feel free to use the house. My work has become an element of 'discomfort' in the family. As soon as it was possible, the terrace during the hot hours became a workspace of my own"; F: "Fortunately, the house is large and the children have space to play, they can play football in the corridor or entrance hall. . .the problem is which room to work in with a minimum of silence, I'm very nervous about this. . ."

In this evening meeting, we deeply reflected on which domestic spaces and objects (desks, sofas, tables) could be refunctionalized or made unrecognizable with the help of technology: a multimedia background can transform a bedroom or a kitchen into a study. In this way, the spaces of intimacy are

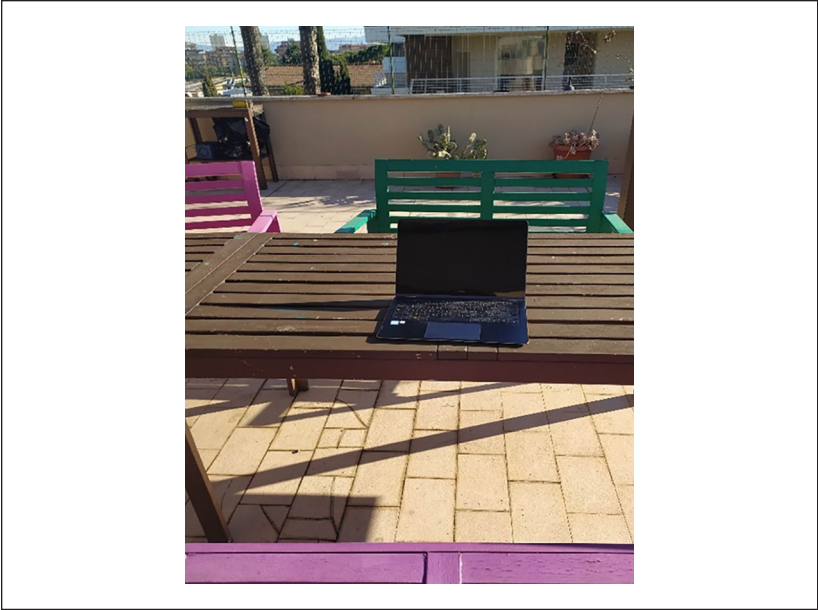


Figure 2. My terrace office, as soon as the good weather allowed it.

preserved from external gazes, and the usual spaces or objects are made available to form the scenography that helps to build the image of a supposedly elitist profession. Therefore, R. could use the desk in the bedroom and make the house out of his presence. Domestic spaces in all three of our homes were reorganized as places of work, leisure, and sharing of playful experiences (see Figures 2–3), equipped to carry out distance learning lessons for children or to meet on some online platform for an aperitif with friends (see Figure 4). They functioned as places for the children to play a tennis lesson or synchronized swimming training, obviously without water, for a catechism meeting or an hour of relaxation, meditation, or gymnastics. The house adapts to the different needs of its members who, individually and as a family group, have to live and experience it.

Mothers and Workers during the Lockdown: Times of Conciliation or Conflict?

The family conciliation in all three of our families pre-COVID was always rather complex, but manageable, thanks to the outsourcing of some domestic



Figure 3. The garden is a space for gymnastics or meditations, for those who own it!!

activities (a maid for a few hours a week, for example) and the help of grandparents or babysitters when it was not possible to take care of the children directly. Furthermore, as Hernández Cordero and González Granados (2020) observe, staying at home for a long time without external help also significantly increases domestic work. The more one works, the dirtier the home gets, and the more one cooks and uses more space, paradoxically. When we spend a great deal of time away from home, we can neglect housework almost without realizing it. With the lockdown, but also in the moments following the opening in June 2020, we renounced all external help to avoid bringing possible contagion from the outside into the house and potentially infecting the people who would have entered our house:

I realized almost suddenly that neither R. (who does the cleaning twice a week) nor the babysitter could no longer come, and I realized how grateful I must be to R. for his work. Now, every day, in addition to university work and looking after the children, we have to manage everything else: washing, ironing, washing dishes, cooking. It is a continuous cycle since we're always at home. It is truly exhausting! (from F.'s diary., April 2, 2020)

L. can no longer come and help me around the house. At first, I thought it was good. We would have lowered the risk of contagion. My husband is very tired on the weekend from a heavier work routine, to which is added the burden of

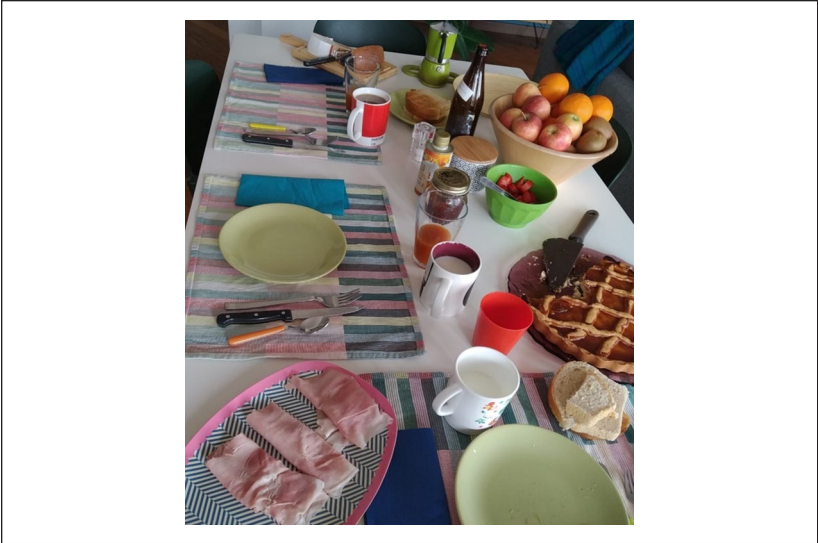


Figure 4. A remote brunch with friends.

maintaining the relationship with the outside world - spending, etc. Today was a hell of a day, in the lecture break I put the washing machine on. In the end, I was very tired, and I thought there were even days before I had put on the washing machine that I vacuumed between meetings. I am sad, I have the perception that these domestic activities carried out during work cause my profession to lose prestige. (from R.'s diary, April 13, 2020)

It is 11 in the morning. I have been working for 4 hours, my son asks me what we are going to eat for lunch. In this period, the routine housework has greatly increased. I must add that I have to cook not only dinner (as well as in the pure lockdown) but also lunch because my son is at home. (from R.'s diary, April 13, 2020)

Suddenly, we found ourselves working entirely from home, without alternating between moments at home and moments in the office, with housework to be managed entirely and children of different ages to look after and who needed support for distance learning:

This day was quite heavy. My son called me for the remote lesson because he could not use the platform, and often the internet connection was interrupted, requiring my intervention. At the same time, my daughter, albeit older and

usually autonomous in following her online lessons, today discovered PowerPoint and needed clarification while she had a lesson. In addition, I would have had to answer numerous emails from students who needed clarification. Distance learning for them is also experienced negatively. They flood me with emails. (from N.'s diary, April 8, 2020)

Reconciling everything was truly a complex challenge that put a strain on our multitasking skills as working women and mothers, seeking time to dedicate to our children by creating moments for entertainment that were not abandoned to video games or television. On sharing rules and identifying new routines, "Even though my son is older and independent in his studies, I realized that progressively, as the lockdown continued, loneliness pushed him toward video games. He is often in the room alone. I cannot figure out how to take care of him. As a child, it was easier. It was enough to organize a game, read a story, and watch TV together. Now the main activity that we can share is cooking. Sometimes we cook together, and he mostly makes sweets. I involve him in this activity. We often play a card game in the evening. I have many worries and frustrations. My model of a caring mother is linked to childhood. How to be close to an independent guy, with his interests and who still chooses friends even if at a distance. How to do fun things together if you do not share many interests? We love different genres of films, different TV programs. . . ." (from R.'s diary, April 28, 2020).

Whether children are autonomous adults or not yet autonomous, the relationship with them is one of the salient points of our reflection and experiences and calls into question the dimension of care and the model of motherhood. In the case of adult children, the model of mother-caregiver, often based on childhood and adolescence, is in crisis and gives way to often conflicting interactions. The care of small and even older children who are not yet autonomous requires almost total dedication and attention. The children often called upon us for diverse reasons: to show us what they were doing, to ask us to play with them, when they were arguing, when they wanted a snack, when they had to go to the bathroom (only the little ones), and for a thousand other reasons that marked our day: "Today, we have gone from board games to continuous arguments over who could use the PlayStation or choose the film to see, to prepare cookies for a snack. Thank goodness tomorrow will be a beautiful day, and we will be able to spend some time gardening. Very often, during the lockdown, after critical days like this, I stop to think of those who do not have an outdoor space and are forced to keep their children only inside the walls of the house. The days pass slowly, and creativity is often one of the few tools we have to fill these monotonous and often empty days in a fun way" (from N.'s diary, April 28, 2020). Setting daily



Figure 5. Preparing family lunches: between games and culinary experiences.

goals related to cooking was also important for involving children and teenagers in different and fun activities to fill times that were previously spent in relationships with peers or in entertainment and sporting activities outside the home environment. Even if they were often fast and not tasty foods, such as the dedicated and well-prepared cuisine of the grandparents: “Mom, Grandma’s cake is much better, but I appreciate your efforts (my son’s comment on my birthday cake) . . . long live sincerity. It was ugly in appearance, but at least it tasted good. Therefore, I console myself, at least today, my birthday, between a department meeting and the students’ reception for the theses that will be discussed next week” (from N.’s diary, March 26, 2020). However, some particular dishes were also created with the help and involvement of the children to create sharing of activities to try and make that slow spending-of-time inside the house more pleasant (see figure 5–6 and 7).

While our children were used to the fact that their fathers were buried in their studies or away from home to work, they were aware that we mothers were usually available for their needs (play, companionship for extracurricular activities, and homework) because when we went there to take them home from school or the grandparents, “we had already finished work.” In short, the fathers were perceived, even during the lockdown, as a “dad not to disturb,” while the perception of the children toward us was very different; they knew us as the “mother who is available.” If anything was needed, we were the ones who were interrupted, whether we were carrying out a work activity or not.

That we managed our scientific work in the evening or late at night to not interfere with their afternoon activities obviously did not exist for them as a concept. Therefore, it was very difficult, if not impossible, to make them



Figure 6. Picnic in the living room.

understand that we needed to concentrate for a few hours without being interrupted every 5 minutes or that they could not enter the room because we were in a remote lesson or an important meeting. They saw only their pressing needs without hearing reason. This caused misunderstandings, anger, frustration, and sadness in the children and, in us, a sense of guilt for not being with them as we would have liked and as we think they deserved. These considerations were the subject of our evening distance meeting in which we discussed the sense of guilt about interpersonal conflicts that the management of work, home, and children entailed. It was May 1st, and F. made her debut: "Today, I worked very little, running between homework and online lessons with M. I worked with glue, paint and cardboard with L. In addition, at the end when I start reading my emails, my 5-year-old son comes over and says, 'Mom, you're always working!' I almost started crying." N. also took the floor talking about her day: "'Today was a special day. In the morning, I helped my mom in the garden planting bulbs, and in the afternoon, she played with me. Usually, she is always busy at work.' When I read this sentence in my son's diary, I felt terribly guilty. I was able to do it because it was a



Figure 7. One of the many desserts cooked with the children.

holiday; otherwise, my days are always marked by lessons or meetings that do not allow me to dedicate myself to the children as the situation requires. I believe that in this period I should spend more time with them but it is not possible for me. My activity marked by lessons and meetings must go on. It cannot stop as other mothers are doing by choice or by obligation due to the pandemic.” Finally, R. expressed her feelings: “I feel very guilty because I cannot do many things with my son. At the beginning of the lockdown, a sort of good mood had taken over me. Finally, after years of broken weeks (three days away from home at work and three days home), I can stay at home continuously and enjoy my son. I can do many things with him. Days go by, and I do nothing at home but work, work, work. I had never worked so hard at home. Before, I separated work, relegating it to the days spent out and when I was in Rome, and only in the morning when I was alone at home. Now my work has invaded every space of intimacy and creates a moat with my son, who stays in the room so as not to disturb me. I am screwing myself into a vicious circle.” At the end of this meeting, our morale was very low. It seemed to us that the accumulated efforts had not helped us find solutions; not even

being together, which in other meetings had given us back our energy or had helped us find the right path. This time, we did not find that it had been helpful.

After all, in many families during the lockdown, the parents were at home without doing any work. This also allowed us to strengthen family ties and to dedicate ourselves exclusively to the children's care. We found this positive aspect linked to the lockdown and the pandemic that "we have lived little and not lived at all." In addition, nervousness and concern developed in us because we felt that the emotional tranquility of our young children, preteens and adolescents was essential at this time. Fortunately, gender conciliation in these crucial moments came to our rescue. After negotiating some rules, our partners took an active part to ensure adequate support, at least in situations of extreme necessity. Conciliation, however, often also involved quarrels, misunderstandings, and exhausting discussions. This evening, April 24, 2020, we spoke by phone. F: "My husband does not understand that if he keeps the children, he should avoid them constantly coming to me and interrupting me every 10 minutes. . .he also thinks he makes a great effort to take care of them a few hours a day without realizing that is what I do every afternoon when I go to pick them up from school." N: "Dear, we are in the same boat, My husband takes care of cooking and ordering groceries, but he expects me exclusively to follow the children in distance learning. However, I feel overwhelmed with work, the children's homework and household chores. . .and sometimes I lose it. . . Today, I am angry with my husband because he does not want to take care of the homework, and with myself, because I was not up to keeping everything under control, and so my son had not done some homework. Solution? Forced autonomy, teaching my child to check the homework site by himself." Even this evening, we have not found solutions to the situation, but the gratification of sharing with each other the difficulties we are facing with our husbands has helped us to improve and to face the coming days, while trying to make them understand our difficulties.

Smart Working: Between Homeworking and Forced Work from Home

In the context that we have described, the definition of "forced work from home" seems fitting rather than talking about smart working, where the term "forced" encompasses different meanings. We were able to continue to work even at a distance, forced because there was no other choice or negotiation, and trapped in a situation with no other organizational options: "My husband has a job that is not flexible at all. He works from home but with normal hours 9am–6pm and often until 7pm. At this point, having a more flexible

schedule, I was forced to work as much as possible in the evening after dinner or very early in the morning so I could follow the children during the day. Needless to say, I am undone” (from F’s diary, March 20, 2020).

“Twenty days have already passed since the lockdown began; it seems an eternity to me. Tonight, I am exhausted. My hours of sleep are now just over five hours. I start early in the morning with the preparation of the lesson. Then, following the lesson, the student received or met with colleagues with some interruptions from the children who needed something for their remote lessons or homework. Lunch and dinner are prepared by my husband, but dishwashing and the washing machine are my responsibility. After dinner is often invaded by meetings or work activities that do not require comparison with others” (from N’s diary, March 30, 2020).

During the lockdown, it was evident how the absence of external help and the time spent in the school system, or the extracurricular activities of the children, took away time from us, who were used to working incessantly in spaces, often other than the home that did not have all the appropriate equipment (printers, screens large enough not to lose our sight, and professional chairs). We had the feeling of not being able to do anything anymore and that the hours of the day and evening were not enough for the amount of work that accumulated: housework, childcare, entertainment, help with homework and for DAD (distance learning), our university job and, in last place, some time for ourselves (in these weeks it was also difficult to take a calm shower or color our hair at home, a new but necessary experience given the closure of the hairdressers and the white hair that needed to be fixed, as the webcams—for better relationships—were always on). Despite the presence of our husbands, who certainly shared some of these duties with us, although not in a completely equal way, we felt totally overwhelmed in a world where conciliation was not possible. In moments of real despair, we often thought of quitting. If we had not had interesting and much more flexible jobs than others, I think we would have resigned. On May 10, 2020, for example, we spoke again, this time with a video call. F: “I definitely think I’m lucky not to have lost my job and I do not feel entitled to complain if I think of other situations. However, managing everything by doing everything so badly and in a hurry is very stressful. If I did not have this job, which is a lot, interestingly, I think I would have resigned; these rhythms are not sustainable for long.” N. responds to these considerations with a further outburst: “The heaviness of these days in lockdown, of smart working, often experienced as homeworking but also in some aspects forced labor from home, lead me to think with a little envy of those who had to and were able to stop, the feeling of being trapped in having to work, has sometimes led me to think, ‘Why can’t I stop too?’ Maybe I could quit and take back my life and my family? Of course,

perhaps there were moments of extreme discouragement, of reflections with my innermost self, but in a country where all or a lot had stopped being always on, the wave led me to say enough is enough. I can't take it anymore." The comparison highlighted an important aspect: the daily efforts related to the pandemic and the awareness of working in interesting jobs that involve us to the point of making us able to overcome the obstacles.

Conclusion

Before the development of industrialization and for a long time after, the men and women of some social classes (peasants, artisans, and traders) identified the home as the place of domestic life. Houses and shops were one, and these people worked at home, interacting with family members, neighbors, and the neighborhood (Barbagli 1985). Under these conditions, children were closely acquainted with their parents' work, and work socialization began at home. In some respects, the lockdown experience brought us back to these experiences of the past, catapulting us into a new condition that has never been experienced or experienced, in part. The new element was the speed with which this process took place; within a few days, we found ourselves stuck at home working and, at the same time, taking care of the childcare and domestic work with new times and in spaces that required quick rearrangements. In part, as university professors, we were already used to working from home, if we felt the need, but in conditions in which freedom of choice was the guideline of our actions. During the lockdown, smart working appeared in many ways as "forced work from home" with very little smart work and where the rational sphere interacted continuously with the emotional sphere. The home, family, and work context have become fluid and unstable, paraphrasing Bauman (2003, 2005). The synchronization of life and work times, and being mothers and workers, has led us to transform the working relationship with the time and spaces in the home and family. The home, with its intimacy, which was often a point of confluence of tensions accumulated in other places, including the workplace, was not ready to welcome the change to smart working with its new but also cumbersome technological presences, such as those of several family members being connected at the same time.

Undoubtedly, as the literature on the subject states, the fact that the family's well-being passes through the individual's well-being is reconfirmed, which is interdependent between the different components. Moreover, the ability of parents to adapt to change has been an important resource. This global smart working experiment due to COVID-19 allowed workers to share family duties more equitably with greater complementarity between hours of domestic work and care. However, beyond the immediate perception, the

results of the research carried out in this period show that this often did not happen, and most of these activities remained a larger burden for women (Alon et al. 2020; Del Boca et al. 2020; Lagomarsino et al. 2020). Our CAE work, one of the few carried out during the lockdown, is part of this debate and underscores what has been found in other research carried out in the same period with respect to the unequal distribution of the domestic and care load within the couple. In this sense, we believe that our work can be particularly significant, as it examines three family life experiences carried out in a very peculiar historical-social context. With smart working in the COVID-19 era, family life and work are intertwined, children have discovered what parents truly do when they are at work, and colleagues and bosses have entered the intimacy and architectural arrangements of the home, drawing fragments of mutual knowledge.

What Can We Gain from This Experience?

The results of our CAE in a pandemic period allow, on one hand, reflection on the importance of the CAE method in investigating the deepest and sometimes hidden interstices of the relationship between working, domesticity, and motherhood. This method shows all its potential in moments of particular difficulty in giving meaning, even before finding the words to tell about sudden and catastrophic life events. The CAE narrative allows you to find the deep and collective meaning of experiences that would otherwise remain entangled in what is unspeakable and crushed in a gray area of nonsematized malaise. On the method side, the lockdown condition, which forced us to stay at home for a long period, has led to an intensification of the mediated modalities of social relations through communication technologies. The EWC in a pandemic period allows us to reflect with greater awareness on the use of technology in qualitative research, especially when intimacy and daily life are investigated.

On the other hand, our CAE research has allowed us to reflect on the ways in which forms, conditions, and working identities affect the remodeling of spaces of domesticity, family relationships, and ideas of parenthood. In particular, regarding teleworking from home, several considerations can be formulated. Below, we will present the risks and positive aspects.

Risks of Smart Working

It is still important to underscore the risks, even if true smart working (not experienced as forced work from home) could increase individual free time and allow activities that were previously acquired by others (De Masi 2020),

as experienced during the lockdown. The overlap between life and work and work and life in some cases and some moments can be experienced as alienation; it can be complex to separate the two areas and not fall into the trap of working 24/7. The ability to properly separate times and areas must, therefore, be the goal to be pursued, and soon—an aspect that today, during the pandemic, is instead continually emphasized as the negative side of working from home.

Positive Aspects of Smart Working for Women

Another important point is the technological preparation of both the working parents and the spaces of the house. If everything was improvised in the lockdown, the search for stability in this modality, which potentially, when planned with and agreed to by women, could allow a greater conciliation of motherhood with the work experience and represent a crucial tool for inclusion. In terms of gender, smart working could facilitate the entry of women into the world of work in specific moments of life transition, such as the birth of a child and its intrinsic flexibility, allowing the development of individual careers by managing concise work aspects with family dimensions (Angelici and Profeta 2020). Not all types of work can be conducted through smart working, as seen from the practical experience of the lockdown. However, so-called knowledge workers, where work is spread over all lifespans, can certainly benefit from this job reconversion. The new working domesticity can present advantages, which the single individual can take advantage of according to his own experiences and needs. In theory, where smart working is well organized, it should open up more space and time for oneself, guaranteeing greater success in the work-life balance. One's professionalism can be managed in every place, and men and women can educate themselves on each other's times by enhancing their times and abilities. Therefore, this sort of global social experiment, carried out thanks to the pandemic, has allowed families to experience greater sharing of tasks and responsibilities and a taste of what smart working could become under normal conditions, with children at school and the home spaces expertly rearranged.

Future Challenges

The pandemic experience has highlighted how often women become the point of reference and synthesis of domestic activities with increased work and fatigue. This shows us how smart working, to become a real opportunity for women in some phases of the individual and family life cycle, must involve a rethinking and a production of a new culture that is more

participatory, with balanced democratic domesticity. Therefore, the challenge for workers and women is finding the balance between working time, free time, and care time in the near future, in the synthesis between family, work, and community commitments. Being a smart worker and a working mother is a new condition that must be interpreted and managed with new resources and skills.

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1. In Italy during the Covid pandemic the word smart working used to indicate the teleworking from home. In this article we use it in this sense.

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