Academic and Research Work from Home during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract

The pandemic represents a turning point which affects the micro-politics of managing productive, reproductive and social life in our new everyday lives. In this article, we make a contribution to the recent and growing scientific debate by exploring academic researchers' processes of construction and de-construction of spatial, temporal and relational boundaries that take place in the pandemic work-life stay-at-home style. Particular attention is paid to some macro-structural drivers of work and family life, specifically the role of gender and the organisational culture of the neoliberal university. We chose an exploratory, qualitative, non-directive methodology in order to grasp the permeability between the public and the private that this pandemic, as ever before, makes clear. The empirical material consists of ten in-depth narrative video-interviews conducted online with Italian researchers living in different Regions. The

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article offers an empirical analysis of working from home with a specific focus on the academic context, which is a privileged setting for the investigation of gender inequalities. The analysis sheds light on subjective experiences of the disarticulation of boundaries and their intertwining with the neoliberal ideal type of academic researcher that have unequal consequences on the experience of time-space, productivity, and intimate relationships between men and women, women with and without children and people who live alone or with family.

1. Introduction

In Italy, the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed on 21 February 2020. On 22 February, universities and schools were closed in Veneto and Lombardy and from 8 March the activities were moved online throughout the national territory until the end of the academic/school year. After the summer, with the start of the new academic year, universities have resumed their work activities almost entirely remotely, especially teaching and research activities not requiring laboratories and special equipment (as in SSH sciences). The COVID-19 pandemic marks indeed a worldwide epoch-making moment which is affecting not just economic markets, demographic statistics, health systems and international relations, but also the micro-politics of organising and becoming in our new everyday lives at home (Plotnikof et al., 2020). Is this new modality of managing productive, reproductive and social life by staying at home a new form of contemporary organising 'beyond organisation'? Does the spatial, temporal and relational dis-articulation present different implications for men and women working in academia in terms of work-life balance? What about the differences among people who are single, who are in a couple and those with children?

Recent research on the effect of COVID-19 on everyday life suggests that the situation caused by the pandemic has brought to light pre-existing gendered social structures and shows that gender inequalities have dramatically exacerbated across the globe (e.g. Alon et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Craig, Churchill, 2020; Czymara et al., 2020; Hjálmsdóttir, Bjarnadóttir, 2020; Manzo, Minello, 2020), also with specific reference to the university context (Myers et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2020; Yildirim, Eslen-Ziya, 2020). However, empirical research is scarce.

In this article, we make a contribution to the scientific debate by exploring academic researchers' processes of construction and de-construction of spatial, temporal and relational boundaries that take place in the stay-at-home lifestyle,

paying particular attention to the role of gender and the organisational culture of the neoliberal university.

The university setting is a privileged context for the construction, deconstruction and transformation of gender. Moreover, gender inequalities in academia are exacerbated by the principles of individual entrepreneurial freedom and market deregulation of the neoliberal agenda, which is becoming predominant (Poggio, 2018).

We chose to look at 'boundary work' processes, paying attention to some macro-structural drivers of work and family life, specifically the role of gender and the neoliberal university's organisational culture, in order to overcome the idea of two ontologically distinct and separated spheres of life as well as the understanding of 'balance' as a matter of individual choice, which have been criticised in the literature (De Coster, Zanoni, 2019; Fleetwood, 2007; Lewis et al., 2007; Özbilgin et al., 2011). This binary conceptualisation, which tends to reify static, bounded concepts of life domains, fails to grasp the permeability between the public and the private (Bloom 2016; Glucksmann, 2005) that this pandemic, as ever before, has made clear. Furthermore, in order to circumnavigate the binary vision of work and family issues, we chose an exploratory, qualitative, non-directive methodology. The empirical material consisted of ten narrative non-directive video-interviews with researchers working from home.

We argue that the organisational culture of the neoliberal university increases the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on boundaries management and intimate relationships exacerbating social inequalities especially between women with and without children.

2. Theoretical framework

The scientific debate on 'work-life balance' was born with the intention of overcoming the vision of 'separate spheres' for its tendency to reify the division of social experience into public/male and private/female worlds, and to overlook the interactions between them (Carreri, Dordoni, Poggio, forthcoming). However, the key concepts in the work-life balance literature, especially the concepts of 'conflict' and 'enhancement/enrichment', overlook the diverse, embedded, mixed and messy ways in which individuals manage their family, work and community life, not all of which fall within 'balance' or the condition of being 'out-of-balance' (e.g. Gambles et al., 2006; Rajan-Rankin, 2016).

These theoretical and analytical limitations are particularly evident today if we look at those workers who, in the midst of this pandemic, had to live and

work at home by negotiating time, space, and relationships in a new way. These workers, thanks to the use of technologies, have the possibility to 'work anytime and anywhere'. The COVID-19 situation has represented a context of 'experimentation' of new strategies in redefining the boundaries between paid work, social reproduction and social life, and with them (at least potentially) gender roles. In this phase, instead of looking at the outcomes of 'conflict' in negative terms or 'enhancement/enrichment' (sometimes also called 'harmonization') in positive ones, an operation that inevitably tends to replicate the logic of two separate spheres of life, it seems more promising to us to look at the processes of construction and deconstruction of work-life boundaries, and therefore to shed some light on the processes of balancing relationships between work, family and social life.

A recent strand of research placed at the centre of its investigation the concept of 'work-family boundary' (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996), with which scholars refer to the ways individuals create (or do not create) clear boundaries between the different domains of their daily lives. Examples are segmentation, integration or more mixed processes (Kossek, 2016). This line of research has allowed for the study of the 'fit' between effective boundary practices and those desired by individuals (Ammons, 2013), and directionality of individuals' boundary practices to understand whether they tend to integrate or separate family from work (for example, by taking or not taking their children into the office) or vice versa, i.e., integrating or separating work from family (for example, by taking or not taking work home) (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek et al., 2012).

Importantly, despite the explanatory capacity of the concept of 'boundary work', there has been no in-depth exploration into the practices, the meanings and the power dynamics which link the structural drivers to the micro-level experiences (Hughes, Silver, 2020). Williams et al. (2016) pointed out how work-life studies continue to move toward an individualistic direction, emphasising issues of individual cognition and decision-making, while neglecting the power relations and macro-structural drivers of work and family life, also in cultural terms.

The way in which people reconcile work activities, care responsibilities and social life is not a private experience, but the result of complex interdependencies between economic and socio-cultural contingencies. Work-life balance research needs to take into account multiple and interrelated levels in order to bring dimensions like gender, social class, migrant status, worker status, organisational and social context to the core of the debate about work-life articulation (Özbilgin et al., 2011).

By moving in this direction, we deem crucial putting work-life 'boundary work' – or we could say 'boundary(less)-work to emphasise the melting

conditions under COVID-19 – into relation with the process of constructing gender boundaries (Carreri, 2015; 2020). For the processes of construction and deconstruction of boundaries, we use the term 'boundary work' to indicate the (predominantly) discursive and narrative practices by means of which boundaries are (de)constructed (Gieryn, 1983). As Lamont and Molnár wrote, gender boundaries are a fertile terrain for the study of boundary crossing and boundary shifting as well as the institutionalisation of boundaries (2002: 177).

It is important to put 'boundary work' into relation with the process of constructing gender boundaries precisely in this phase of the pandemic as gender inequalities have been magnified (e.g. Alon et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Craig, Churchill, 2020; Czymara et al., 2020; Hjálmsdóttir, Bjarnadóttir, 2020; Manzo, Minello, 2020), also with specific reference to the university context (Myers et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2020; Yildirim, Eslen-Ziya, 2020).

Gender boundaries are indeed of crucial importance in the academic organisation (e.g. Van den Brink, Benschop, 2012). Importantly, the research showed that academic women with care duties have an additional disadvantage (Bozzon et al., 2017; Ivancheva et al., 2019; Maxwell et al., 2019; Gaio Santos and Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Thun 2019). Furthermore, especially in the early career stages, gender differences are particularly marked: the precariousness of the academic path affects female researchers to a greater degree, with women having much more difficulties than men in reaching stable positions (Murgia, Poggio, 2018).

These findings must be analysed in light of the changes in organisational culture, following the introduction within universities of neoliberal policies which promote a new ideal academic subject profoundly imbued with masculinity. Recent neoliberal policies have reshaped the academic world on the blueprint of a market (Currie et al., 2000; Poggio, 2018; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2017). New Public Management controls academics through practices that foster hyper-competition, including temporary contracts increasing job insecurity, funding pressures, and performance accountability measures (Ball, 2016; Clarke, Knights, Jarvis, 2012; Thomas, Davies, 2002).

This literature has emphasised that these practices do not only increase academics' workload but also exert control by enjoining individuals into self-definitions, identities and social relations aligned with the neoliberal norms of individualised efficiency and performativity (Brunila, 2016), accountability towards multiple audiences (Frølich, 2011; De Coster, Zanoni, 2019), academic entrepreneurship (Nikunen, 2014) and flexibility (Knights, Clarke, 2014).

The academic ideal creates new expectations about employees' greater autonomy for integrating paid work, care work and private life more generally, eventually feeding into a fantasy of achievable work-life balance (Bloom, 2016; Thomas, Davies, 2002). However, gender disparities were present in the houses

of academics before the lockdown: research shows that female academics perform more housework than men do (Schiebinger et al., 2008).

Importantly, female academics with children have especially struggled to reconcile work, domestic and care commitments during the pandemic, with the consequence of producing fewer paper proposals and publications in scientific journals, thus possibly facing future negative consequences in their academic career (Myers et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2020; Yildirim, Eslen-Ziya, 2020).

Moreover, in this extraordinary moment universities have evaded their responsibility to ensure women with caring duties full participation in the academic work by understanding work-life balance as a 'private' matter (Nash, Churchill, 2020). Gender inequalities were already an issue pre-lockdown, as women published less than their male colleagues and were cited less than men (EC 2018), but they are now further increasing for women with children, and with a second wave of the pandemic upon us the situation does not bode well.

3. Empirical research

The object of this research is the working-from-home experience during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, in particular during the lockdown period. The article focuses on the empirical case of workers in the academy and research sector. The main aim of the project is to investigate how they perceived the modification of public/private boundaries and online/offline de- and re-structured relationships, and to observe what surviving strategies these workers developed.

This is a privileged sector to observe due to the widespread use of digital devices, new media and remote work, especially in SSH disciplines even before the pandemic. Secondly, this context is characterised by a high degree of organisational autonomy, real or perceived. Thirdly, it is marked by the requirement of very high productivity levels and temporary contracts, both influencing everyday life.

We decided to conduct a qualitative study using non-directive techniques and information technologies. Qualitative research is 'a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that makes the world visible' (Denzin, Lincoln, 2000: 3).

In an attempt to understand and interpret a social phenomenon that has conditioned everyone's life worldwide, the researcher's experience and point of view cannot possibly be ignored in this case. We are two female researchers interested in gender inequalities and work-life balance issues. We live in Verona (Veneto) and Milan (Lombardy). We have been living and working at home for several weeks during the Italian lockdown, from 22 February to 4 May, and

beyond. After the summer, we have often been working from home – to this day, in November 2020, because access to the university offices is limited as the 'second wave' of COVID-19 is looming over us. We have personally and physically explored new ways of doing research, as well as new ways of experiencing couple life, motherhood, leisure time and socialising.

Furthermore, the qualitative approach allows researchers to obtain 'a *deeper* and *richer* picture of what is going on in particular settings', also with a small number of research participants (Goodwin, Horowitz, 2002: 44). As argued by Crouch and McKenzie, 'it is much more important for the research to be *intensive*, and thus persuasive at the conceptual level, rather than aim to be extensive with intent to be convincing, at least in part, through enumeration' (2006: 494).

During the Italian first lockdown period, we decided to recruit a snowball sample of researchers working in SSH fields. On the one hand, as commonly occurs in qualitative research, it is a 'small, relatively homogeneous sample of individuals' (Elliot, 2005). On the other, there is an internal heterogeneity in the interviewees group in order to have an overview on structural dimensions: we recruited researchers of both genders, who lived in various family situations (single, in a couple, in a couple with children) and worked in different regions across the Country.

This research is focused on researchers' narratives, through the analysis of in-depth and non-directive interviews. Indeed, as stated by Elliot, 'if narratives become the focus of research not simply because they provide an insight into individuals' experiences and the meanings they make of them, but because their form tells us something about the cultural framework within which individuals make sense of their lives, then the close analysis of narratives produced by a relatively small sample of individuals may produce evidence that is considered to provide an understanding of the intersubjective meanings shared by the whole of a community' (2005: 28).

In this case, visual material and in-depth interviews allowed us to overcome the public/private dichotomy and pre-set logics (De Coster, Zanoni, 2019). In particular, this article focuses on the interview data. We chose to use unstructured interviews, specifically narrative video-interviews conducted online, which are characterised by enhanced flexibility and a freer interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer than structured or semi-structured ones. Moreover, in order not to take a binary division of the two spheres for granted, the choice of themes and topics was left to the interviewees (Bichi, 2017).

By using non-directive and in-depth interviews, the researcher could understand the world of the interviewee's everyday life and his/her point of view, through a relational approach that can differ for each subject. The

interviewer started with an introductive question on the main theme, leaving the respondents free to answer by expressing themselves. The question was: 'With reference to the past and current period, in which university activities were suspended/modified, can you tell me about your personal experience of working from home and reconciling with private and family life?'. Moreover, we added an explicit sentence, to emphasise the non-directivity: 'I will try not to introduce any more themes after this main question. What interests me is talking about the issues that you personally consider the most relevant, without me leading the conversation'.

Narrative interviews lasted between 90 and 140 minutes, were conducted remotely through Skype by one of us between June and July 2020, recorded and fully transcribed, and analysed by both of us using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. After a first analysis carried out individually, we worked together sharing codes and discussing our interpretation during online meetings. Specifically, respondents were 5 female and 5 male researchers, between 33 and 49 years old. Among the men, 3 are fathers and 2 live alone; among the women, 3 are mothers, one lives with her partner, and one lives alone (Tab. 1).

TABLE 1. Interviewees.

Sex	Age	Residence	Was living (with)
M	43	North-Eastern Italy	Partner, 2 children
F	44	North-Eastern Italy	Partner, 2 children
F	40	North-Western Italy	Partner, 2 children
F	33	North-Western Italy	Partner
M	45	North-Western Italy	Partner, 2 children
M	49	North-Western Italy	Partner, 1 child
F	38	North-Western Italy	Partner, 1 child, mother/sister
M	36	Central Italy	Alone
M	39	Southern Italy and the Islands	Alone
F	45	Southern Italy and the Islands	Alone

The use of information technology can have positive and negative effects on social research (Hanna, 2012; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Conducting online interviews is nothing like establishing face-to-face relationships but can be a useful method to carry out synchronous interviews when meeting face-to-face is hampered by external conditions (Janghorban et al., 2014). One of the limitations of these technological tools is a lower degree of intimacy and closeness between interviewee and interviewer. However, in a situation such as the one we are living, where in-person meetings must take place wearing masks and at physical distance, Skype, or other online platforms, probably represent the better option.

Recording through a private communication platform poses significant ethical questions but circumscribing the negative elements of the instrument is possible by requesting consent and deleting all traces from the platform after the interview, as we did. From a methodological point of view, it should finally be highlighted that we used the same software, Skype, to communicate with each other during the different phases of research work.

4. Results and discussion: working from home during a pandemic in the neoliberal academia

4.1 Boundary(less) work as a matter of 'conquering own times' or disciplining to 'extreme neoliberalism'

The researchers we interviewed highlighted how their job has always allowed them to mix times and spaces of private and professional life:

> As scholars, as researchers, we know that we do not actually have proper working hours, apart from lectures, meetings and so on, of course… Working hours are always quite independently managed, even in normal conditions (F45).
> In our job, our working space is often… the house can be as important a working space as an office. We are sort of ante-litteram smart workers, in a way (M39).

Nevertheless, the spatio-temporal-relational dis-articulation occurred during the pandemic, and in some ways still ongoing, has brought about drastic changes in the daily lives of academics at home. Our analysis sheds light on new ways of organising work-care-life that are discursively constructed using two main, quite different, types of rhetoric: the interviewees adopted either the rhetoric of 'conquered time', or one we could call of 'extreme neoliberalism'. Through these rhetorics, the subjects discursively constructed an image for themselves and for others that is coherent with their daily boundary(less) work experiences during the pandemic.

Importantly, both rhetorics shed light on the respondents' subjective experiences of the melting (spatial and temporal) conditions of work-care-life during the lockdown, and their perception of how 'productive' they have managed to be in this extraordinary period. We found that productivity in terms of paper publication is a common concern for all researchers interviewed, confirming the strength of the individualistic and competitive model of the Olympus in university (Benschop, Brouns, 2003).

By using the first rhetoric of 'conquered time', the subjects highlighted how the lockdown has allowed them to rediscover their own time, free from the frantic rhythms of academic work, which is described as mechanical and is compared to that of a factory, as well as free from the hectic pace that the city and social life impose. The experience of working from home is positively assessed to the extent that they gain a better quality of time, even for thinking and working. As a young research fellow said: 'The mind is clear from urgencies.'

As we can read in the following excerpts, the lockdown not only allowed them to devote more time to family relationships, but for some of them it also opened new spaces for critical reflection and rethinking about the micro-politics of organising and becoming in their academic daily life.

> It was conquered time. Nowhere near the stupid rhythm the city imposes. […] In this period, I know I am privileged, but the quality of the time I used to think and be together has improved. This time is conquered because we had the chance to re-think it, adapt it, with fewer external conditions, instead of being in a rush with many a thing to do, mechanically, as if we were in a factory (M45).
>
> It was true we were extremely tired, but, you know, also not having the world outside… I mean, sometimes you feel like 'Oh my God, there's the picket here, the demonstration there, the screening of that independent film over there…' Those things that, if you do not go, you feel guilty about it. Not having that burden meant having more calm time for ourselves. […] It was a great time for reflection for me I have to say, because the mind is free from urgencies […] maybe that left me some… I've had the chance to look at some my stuff, big stuff, my relationship with work, with family… a bit more serenely (F33).

This type of rhetoric was used by interviewees regardless of gender and/or parenthood. Rather, they were linked to other 'environmental' conditions such as the availability of large spaces in their living arrangements. This suggests a close link between the dimensions of time and space. Time and space are indeed inextricably connected as time–space, which is socially constituted and shaped by power relations as different social groups have unequal access to and control over time and space dimensions (Massey, 2005). For example, the interviewee in the first excerpt was in their second home in the mountains, with his wife and children, when the lockdown began, thus being able to enjoy green open spaces, whereas the interviewee in the second excerpt lives in a large apartment, which allowed her to reorganise home spaces for her work activities, her partner's, the couples time and free time (with the terrace).

Researchers using this rhetoric highlighted that the lockdown, and more generally the pandemic, has brought to light all the care work - in a broad sense - that is on our shoulders, i.e. self-care, the care of family relationships and friends, affective relationships, the care for the environment, for the household, etc. This is an example of existing and demanding labour that university researchers, under the weight of the neoliberal ideal academic subject norms, often neglect, choosing to devote themselves almost exclusively to productive work. In this sense, this extraordinary period was experienced by researchers who adopted the rhetoric of 'conquered time' as a rediscovery, as well as a reclaim of care work (Fraser, 2016; Thomason, Macias-Alonso, 2020):

> It's not about having children, if you don't have children you have a dog, a cat, the grandma, an uncle… - Yeah, by the way, on top of all this an uncle died, so there was also the funeral, etc. – The problem is that we work too much! I feel like this lockdown has made it even clearer, if any other proof was needed (F33).

Interestingly, those who adopted the rhetoric of 'conquered time' told us that they felt more productive in terms of devising new projects and writing. Having gained time for themselves, for reflection and introspection (Nowotny, 2018), they felt intellectually freer and more creative. As a research fellow said: 'There is no thinking without time.'

> It was conquered time. […] Without time, there is no thinking. With those stupid rhythms, you just go from one thing to the other, mechanically. What you do is stripped of sense, of meaning (M45).
> In that period when I was less anxious, I actually felt freer, I had a clearer mind… I also had some great ideas in this period… […] I wrote other things, with other people, as well as by myself… I also did research (about the pandemic) with a colleague of mine, just like you guys (F33).

We defined 'extreme neoliberalism' the second type of rhetoric used by researchers to describe their new way of experiencing and managing productive, reproductive and social life by staying at home. Contrary to the rhetoric of 'conquered time', it emphasises the invasion of work, both in terms of time and space, into the home, completely changing its look. In terms of directionality, the subjects who adopted this rhetoric tended to integrate from work to the family (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek et al., 2012). Domestic spaces were reconfigured to meet new professional and childcare needs without a clear construction of the boundaries between time-space for work, for oneself, for the family and for socialising. The researchers who used this rhetoric told us about a work situation that went 'to extremes', due to rhythms, workload and

methods, which made them feel deprived of truly intimate time-space (Nowotny, 2018):

> I'd say the situation went a bit too far, in the sense that, apart from the usual deadlines which haven't changed, in the meantime I saw the overlapping of […] a series of meetings and conversations to decide how to have meetings. The increase was substantial! […] I experienced a sort of real invasion of my home, my private life, my living room, etc. by my job, because you can't behave… – even if you're in your house – you can't behave the same way (F45).

Some of the recurrent expressions in the 'extreme neoliberalism' rhetoric were 'extreme situation', 'schizophrenia', 'frenzy', 'crazy situation', which suggest conditions of great stress in pursuing the ideal academic subject in terms of performance, efficiency, flexibility and total availability, productivity and accountability (Brunila, 2016; Knights, Clarke, 2014; Nikunen, 2014; De Coster, Zanoni, 2019).

As a researcher said in reference to his colleagues' behaviour: 'People know you are at home, so they just see time as a non-issue'. The following excerpts tell the experiences of researchers' self-discipline towards this model, and their difficulties in coping with the total de-structuring of their time.

> An element of further schizophrenia were these continuous demands for contact, which you could not manage simultaneously. What do I mean by that? That in a 'normal' world, one has a diary with all his appointments and knows what goes on each day, life was paradoxically more organised when working offline. When online, you only need be in front of a computer, you get a message asking 'Do you have a couple of minutes? I need to talk to you about something', and there starts a videocall. You know when it starts, but you do not know when it ends. […] People know you are at home, so they just see time as a non-issue (M39).
>
> What frustrated me the most were the endless meetings, I think people went crazy, because they would have meetings for anything. […] It would start and never end, I mean, maybe we really needed to be connected, to make up for the lack of face-to-face social relations. I do not know, but I have noticed this, so many meetings. 5-hour departmental meetings, 4, 5, even 7-hour meetings about teaching… I remember a meeting started at 2pm and finished at 7:40pm, I had my children running around the house, and naturally I could not lock them in a room, so you can imagine, a frenzy! (F40).

The rhetoric of 'extreme neoliberalism' is closely linked to the discourse of productivity, which is the keystone of the evaluation of their work. The subjects

who used this rhetoric had different perceptions of how 'productive' they managed to be during this extraordinary period.

Some researchers told us they felt 'productive in spite of themselves', due to having maintained or, more often, increased the pace and workload in their daily life, but with great fatigue and stress. Productivity was therefore understood as workload and compliance with deadlines, and not in the terms of creativity and originality that we find in the rhetoric of 'conquered time'.

Interestingly, as the following excerpts show, those who perceived being 'productive in spite of themselves' are those who experienced their home space as deprived of its intimacy: for example, A Room of One's Own by Virginia Woolf, that the interviewee talks about in the first excerpt, and the intimate space of the bedroom where pyjamas are supposed to be worn, from the second excerpt. Furthermore, these subjects experienced time as a continuous flow that left no room for self-care, for private time (Nowotny, 2018). As we can read in the following excerpts, in these cases time becomes irrelevant, void of meaning.

> What once was my living room/study, where my desk was, has in fact been turned into my daughter's toy room, so I… I mean, I lost my official place in the house. […] I have lost what Virginia Woolf called 'A room of one's own', with great detriment to my soul and my work. […] I would not say 'I felt productive' is the right way of describing it, nor is 'I felt unproductive'. 'I felt productive in spite of myself', in the sense that I managed to respect almost all the deadlines, but with great struggle. I felt as if I was running a race, with a 20-kg backpack on my shoulders. This was my perception. […] I ran till the end, with great struggle, great sleep deprivation, and great scarcity of time for myself (F38).
>
> Working from home meant an increase in workload for me, because it became an uninterrupted flow of work, without a chance to wind down, through for example the daily chat with a colleague, the moment of distraction, of relax, even just a coffee break, etc… This obviously could not happen, so it was a continuous flow of work… you completely lose sense of time […] There is this tendency to think that time has become irrelevant. I don't know, like… you need to write something to the Head of Department or the X secretary, and instead of waiting for the next day […] you write it in the Teams chat at 11:30pm […] basically both of you are then working at midnight, when in fact you were supposed to be wearing your pyjamas (M39).

Finally, among those who used the rhetoric of 'extreme neoliberalism' there were other subjects who perceived themselves as less capable of producing. In this case, the subjects experienced time as a continuously interrupted flow. The qualitative dimension of time obviously plays a central role here (Adam, 1990; Leccardi, 2014; Nowotny, 2018). However, it must be

closely linked to the material conditions of the interviewees, as already emerged in previous research on the university context (Rafnsdóttir, Heijstra, 2013).

We found that greater difficulties in terms of productivity – but not limited to that – are encountered by parents who work in academy. Following the closure of schools, children have been forced into their homes. Parents were faced with the complex task of reinventing themselves as both teachers and friends for their children, as well as becoming full-time parents, and constantly connected workers. Despite an increase in the involvement of fathers in housework and care work (Di Nicola, 2013; Ruspini, Crespi, 2016) during the pandemic, mothers took on greater care, domestic and mental work than before as revealed in other research (Collins et al., 2020; Craig, Churchill, 2020; Hjálmsdóttir, Bjarnadóttir, 2020). The decision making about the division of tasks at home laid on their shoulders, causing them stress, frustration, and sense of guilt for not doing enough for both care and research work, as we can read in the next excerpts from two interviews with female researchers with children:

> I also had to deal with sense of guilt and regret. […] It's not 'smart working' [working from home in Italy is called and regulated as 'smart working'] though…it's not 'smart' […] I found myself being a researcher, a pre-school educator – which, believe me, is the last job I would do – a primary school teacher, and I felt like I was doing everything a bit raggedly. […] A huge mental load, even online food shopping felt like a chore! Maybe others managed to work it out better, for me it was… If you were to ask me on a qualitative scale, the difficulty and the overload of work and care work, on a scale from 1 to 10… I would say 10. It was very high' (F44).
>
> From 20 February all the way to 4 May, I've basically been confined at home with the kids. It has been a tough period, I have to say, very intense. […] We could not physically ask anyone to help us out with the kids, with the housework. It was very intense for me' (F40).

The mothers interviewed declared they did more housework and care work than fathers and had a greater burden following their children's online education during the pandemic, as found in other research (Guy, Arthur, 2020). These conditions inevitably had a negative effect on the productivity of academic females with care responsibilities (Myers et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2020; Yildirim, Eslen-Ziya, 2020).

Importantly, the consequences of the division of work during the pandemic could last even longer during the recovery process, which can ultimately have negative effects on the career advancement of academic women with children in the long term, especially if they are precarious. More than ever, then, the pandemic brought a 'crisis of care' (Fraser, 2016; Thomason, Macias-Alonso, 2020).

4.2 Gender inequalities and offline intimate relationships

This research shows that academic mothers had much more difficulty in focussing on a topic, devising lectures and writing papers, whilst dealing with domestic and care work. Moreover, we observed that de-structured and even disintegrated boundaries deeply influenced intimate relationships: mothers perceived stress, anxiety, tiredness. In line with recent research (Myers et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2020; Yildirim, Eslen-Ziya, 2020), our study shows that the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown have exacerbated the impact of the neoliberal university especially on women and mothers. Specifically, the mothers we interviewed felt 'squeezed' between care and domestic work, remote research work and online teaching (Hjálmsdóttir, Bjarnadóttir, 2020; Malisch et al., 2020), and this situation led to consequences in their relationships.

We found that the fathers tried to carry out negotiation attempts – more or less successful – with their female partners, to implement gender equality and to preserve the relationship from incurring in potential crises:

> Spaces in my house are not the largest […] my wife would be in the living room, and I'd take a bit of space in the kitchen, or in my bedroom, wherever I could find some space […] our organisation basically involved the possibility for me or her to work for half a day, in the morning or in the afternoon, and look after our son the other half day […] that was based on the commitments each of us had, so there were no fixed rules, just an attempt to try and balance the time each of us could dedicate to our job (M49).

> Of course, there has been some tension, that's inevitable. Yes, I would say that there has been more tension than usual. […] You know, after all we did not have any major problems after our second son was born, in terms of conciliation, but then after that we found… I mean, you either separate, or you find a compromise, the chance to… so that is how we fixed it. […] About sharing the housework… I mean, I revised my share of the housework […] I would say we divide the housework… more or less 50%. Well, actually maybe not 50%, but… I've changed a lot (M43).

Paternity in late modern societies has passed through cultural and structural changes (Di Nicola, 2013; Ruspini, Crespi, 2016). We argue that the aim of fathers' negotiation attempts was to drive a re-structuration of time-space boundaries, thus family responsibilities, to manage together gender inequalities in the time-space dimension (Massey 2013), and to redefine intimate relationships in pandemic times and avoid couple crises.

The researcher mothers interviewed, instead of the fathers, said they have been feeling 'not independent and autonomous', 'forced to constantly ask', and 'afraid of being seen as demanding' by partners. We argue this was because of

boundaries de-structuration or dis-articulation, linked with the model of the neoliberal university.

Gender inequalities stemming from this model (Poggio, 2018), together with the closure of schools and the forced coexistence at home, impacted on working spaces and times, and on the (in)stability of couples with children. The neoliberal norms of individualised efficiency and performativity produced friction, quarrels, sometimes leading to conflicts and couple crises:

> He does, he does do a lot of stuff, he's also good at it. Yet sometimes I have the feeling… maybe it's just my problem, I don't know… I have the feeling of being seen as too demanding. I feel like I need to ask him to help me out […] As if I am asking too much of him. In the education… in the management of the house, of the children. Sometimes I feel like this (F40).

> I felt like I was constantly depending on someone, it's something that really tired me out. [...] I always felt I needed to ask favours to be able to work, to beg for some time to work. Being autonomous and independent is really important to me. […] This period has exacerbated the issues […] The relationship entered a crisis. A crisis (F44).

Moreover, the neoliberal model is politically embodied in the processes of deregulation and privatisation of social services. In a context of Neoliberalism and welfare state retrenchment, family policies do not significantly challenge long-standing class and gender inequalities, but they contribute to their perpetration under new forms (Ferragina, 2019). Certainly, the impact of the pandemic would have been less deep with better public policies for work and family responsibilities' reconciliation.

The institutional and policies issue was quoted in some of the interviews, for example about the controversial 'babysitter bonus'. Because of the inefficiency of public policies, mothers or female family networks (mothers, grandmothers, sisters) often had the prerogative of care work during the lockdown.

> Care work couldn't possibly be shared because my husband worked throughout the lockdown. […] I don't have family in Milan, and neither does my husband, so I asked my mum to come visit us, to spend some time with us […] I was, let's say, lucky that my mum got stuck in Milan […] for about a week. Roughly 10 days later my sister came to stay with us, and she stayed at ours for a month […] I needed someone to help me out […] One thing that I thought was very unfair from the institutions was the way the babysitter bonus was organised, for example. At the beginning, they made it sound like you would get loads of money… first of all, they were €600 in total, a one-off. It's an

absolutely paltry amount for someone who needs to pay for a babysitter (F38).

If researcher mothers felt 'overwhelmed' with care and domestic work and 'squeezed' between it, remote research work and online teaching, on the contrary, a childless female researcher stated she had been living a 'serene period' with her partner and had been feeling 'happy', because she had time for herself to reflect on her life (Nowotny, 2018) and also because she wasn't visiting the workplace:

> We've been very happy. […] I feel very lucky, I mean, we are lucky. We love each other, we get along, we support each other. […] True, we were exhausted, but not having the world outside, you know? […] It was a great moment for reflection for me [...] I was coming out of an awful year, extremely tiring […] The lockdown was a relief […] I took a break from the work environment, which wasn't exactly serene (F33).

We found that in this case her partner helped her to construct a comfortable and safe space at home, and their couple relationship has contributed to her serenity during the lockdown. She told us that the reason of her serenity was that, before the pandemic, she had experienced the high level of competition in the academic workplace in a very stressful way (Monroe, Chiu, 2010; Murgia, Poggio, 2018; Bozzon et al., 2017).

4.3 Living alone, pervasive work and online relationships

The researchers who were living alone during the lockdown perceived a condition of alienation, due to the pervasiveness of work associated with loneliness. According to other research conducted in a different sector, fast working times and rhythms together with the lack of private time can bring to a form of time alienation (Dordoni, 2018; 2020).

This situation was deeply conditioned by the pace of work required in research and teaching activities carried out online. It concerned both men and women, who all stated that they were always working seamlessly for the whole day, facing continue contact requests online, thus having no time for themselves:

> I noticed that sometimes a whole day would pass, and I hadn't even left my chair. I had not talked to anyone, if not through the means in question. […] Single people often have this tendency of becoming workaholics, because they have no limitations, they don't have a kid who claims your attention, or a wife that says 'Could you…' […] the lockdown exacerbated

this […] It was quite alienating, also because I am usually very socially-oriented. […] It was painful for me, that is why the lockdown has been a bad experience for me, because I did not take my private time back. I sacrificed a lot of my private time. I was lonely, I didn't have any kind of emotional interaction (M39).

I live by myself, my relationship just ended so I don't share the house with anyone anymore. I missed the possibility of having an informal conversation with someone, even with scientific value, but not work-related […] I was not used to loneliness from this point of view, not to scientific loneliness (F45).

Single researchers have internalised the neoliberal model of research work: their work ends up absorbing all their time and makes it difficult to have time for themselves (Nowotny, 2018). In this model, the centrality of productivity overcomes the importance of product quality, which instead requires a slower pace of work and different rhythms for reflection and analysis.

Some of the researchers said that they had intimate relationships before the lockdown, then interrupted without possibilities for reconstruction. These broken relationships aggravate the perception of loneliness, of emergency and lack of affectivity, causing traumas and discomfort:

Some relationship I had developed before [the pandemic] inevitably broke […] I was reflecting about the importance of the social bonds we sometime take for granted, whose absence has been traumatic, had a significant impact, especially on life, in fact causing psychological unease […] All the relationships that I am keeping up are all tied to the emergency and are desultory… (M36).

Interviewees also declared that, on the contrary, sometimes they re-structured and rediscovered close relationships but only online. All the researchers living alone tried to deal with this situation using digital tools and software to 'hang out' with friends online, however specifying that it was only a 'surrogate' or a 'palliative'.

One of them even told us that he interacted with his parents remotely much more often than before the pandemic, dining 'with' them through Skype every evening:

In this pandemic period, I talked more to my parents than I've ever done in my life […] We'd call via Skype, while we were eating, we'd eat together, we'd also talk to my sister from across Italy […] For the first two weeks, nearly every day (M36).

[seeing friends online] Yes, I also fell for it, because I needed it after all. I needed to talk to someone, to see them, to joke around… […] Obviously it

was a surrogate of something […] It wasn't the same, it was a surrogate, it compensated for the impossibility of seeing each other (M39).

[hanging out with friends online] was supposed to work as a sort of palliative to feel connected, feel gathered, not feel too lonely, to manage this sense of alienation that was hard to ignore, and so on (F45).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, technological tools have been more important than ever before. As shown in recent studies (Watson et al., 2020), they have become instruments to preserve human sociality. In this case, these acted as surviving strategies to face the pervasiveness of working from home as well as loneliness, during what interviewees called 'interminable working days'.

5. Conclusive remarks

The analysis of researchers' experience of working from home during the Italian lockdown, as well as our own experience of work-care-life, allowed us to critically reflect on the binary vision of work-life in the literature and the concept of 'balance' as a matter of individual choice. First, we observed the dis- and re-articulation of boundaries, the (online) intimate relationships, and the condition of loneliness, and argue that these aspects are closely connected with each other: the redefinition of boundaries takes place on a temporal, spatial and also relational level. Second, we look at 'boundary work' processes, paying attention to some macro-structural drivers of work and family life, specifically the role of gender and the neoliberal model of academic work.

Neoliberal university is characterised by high levels of productivity required, extreme competition and temporary contracts in the early stages, fast working rhythms and gender inequalities (Van den Brink, Benschop, 2012; Murgia, Poggio, 2018; Ivancheva et al., 2019). In light of this kind of organizational culture, we found that the experiences of the melting (spatial and temporal) conditions of work-care-life during the lockdown were described by the participants in terms either of 'conquered time' or 'extreme neoliberalism'.

These rhetorics are linked to researchers' perception of time-space and how 'productive' they have managed to be during the pandemic. While those who use the rhetoric of 'conquered time' feel more productive in terms of creativity, those who use the rhetoric of 'extreme neoliberalism' feel that they are more or less productive in terms of workload and compliance with deadlines. In particular, in this last group academic mothers are the ones who struggle the most, as they took on greater care, domestic and mental work and suffer from lack of time for themselves, as recent research shows (Hjálmsdóttir, Bjarnadóttir, 2020; Malisch et al., 2020; Myers et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2020;

Yildirim, Eslen-Ziya, 2020), thus exacerbating inequalities not only between women and men but also between academic women with and without children.

Interestingly, this situation led to consequences in couple relationships. Although the academic fathers interviewed tried to implement negotiation attempts for gender equality, the women felt 'forced to constantly ask' for time-space to perform work activities, and this produced intra-couple conflicts, sometimes even crises. On the contrary, for the only childless female living with her partner, it was a period of serenity and introspection.

Living alone researchers were also conditioned by the pace of work of research and teaching activities carried out online. They all used the 'extreme neoliberalism' rhetoric and adopted surviving strategies during the pandemic such as online meetings with parents, relatives and close friends (Watson et al., 2020). Loneliness, together with 'boundary(less) work', brought to a condition of alienation – and this shows us how impacting the neoliberal model of research work is on (our) everyday life.

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