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Teleworking conditions: A study on the experiences of telework-home balance after the COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal

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Framework

The COVID-19 pandemic has fostered the expansion of telework, as many companies and institutions have been forced to implement this modality [6;13]. More workers are nowadays expressing interest in working remotely, particularly from home and on a hybrid basis [6;7], with women being slightly more likely than men to work from home both before and during the pandemic crisis [7]. However, differences in working conditions between telework and face-to-face work became more pronounced, especially during the pandemic and regarding working time, work-life balance, health, safety, and well-being [6;7]. Moreover, teleworking conditions during the COVID-19 crisis brought extended challenges for women and additional gender inequalities [e.g.2;5].

In the current post-pandemic period telework is part of the “new normal”[13]. Therefore, it is important to understand its current impact on work-life balance, cohabitational and family arrangements, gender dynamics, and working conditions especially for people who work from home and live with someone else.

Several authors [e.g.2;9;12] display the two faces of telework. On the one hand, teleworking might promote general and working well-being since it reduces commuting, with economic and time impact; provides greater flexibility and availability for family, friends, and leisure; increases motivation and productivity; and promotes overall improvement in quality of life. In contrast, it can increase working time, stress, anxiety, and fatigue through presenteeism, work-family conflict, social isolation, and declining physical activity, and with further implications for working conditions such as work schedules, remuneration, safety, equipment, working demands, training, but also resting periods, privacy and the right to disconnect [7]. Therefore, the literature suggests interferences of working from home with health and physical risks, psychosocial risks, working time, and work-life balance [6;7].

In this context, the concept of work-family balance has been receiving growing attention from researchers. However, there is a lack of consensus on how work-family balance should be defined, measured, and researched [11]. A four-fold taxonomy based on the type of interaction (negative vs. positive) and its direction (WtoF vs. FtoW), argues that work-family balance results from low levels of inter-role conflict (low levels of negative interference) combined with high levels of inter-role enrichment (high levels of positive interaction) [8]. Although a significant amount of research has been analyzing the interferences of work and family [1] less research has considered the possibility that WFnegative and positive interactions can occur simultaneously and at comparable levels of intensity [e.g.3;14] and no study, to our knowledge, has yet analyzed how the different combinations occur when individuals are in telework.



In this study, we explore profiles of work-life balance of women and men in teleworking and cohabiting situations, we characterize these profiles according to gender, cohabitational or family arrangements, and social characteristics and assess the impact on well-being and working conditions.

Methods

An online survey was advertised in social media websites (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Project website) and using mailing lists from the University and partner Business Companies for the widest possible dissemination, between March and July, 2023, to 310 participants who work from home and live accompanied (70%women;30%men). Of these participants, 60% live with their children and 84% with their partner. Participants' mean age is 41.5 years ($SD= 9.8$), and a majority is working in a hybrid mode ($n=202;66\%$). We performed a cluster analysis with positive and negative interactions in both work-to-family and family-to-work directions used as inputs to create the distinct cluster groups. As according to previous research [e.g.8;14], four specific combinations of negative and positive work-to-family and family-to-work interaction experiences could be expected, we tested for a four-cluster typology of using K-means non-hierarchical clustering method. Once we established the meaningful profiles, Chi-Square tests and ANOVAs were used to explore profiles linkages to sociodemographic, work, family, and individual variables.

Results

Our findings revealed that a four-cluster solution could be chosen ($R^2=50.34\%$). So, a first profile, included individuals with the lowest levels of negative home-to-work (NHW) and work-to-home (NWH) interaction and the higher levels of home-to-work positive interaction (PHW) and the second highest level of positive work-to-home interaction (PWH)-*Positive Interaction* group ($n=70;22.5\%$). Another cluster revealed an opposite configuration, with individuals reporting the lowest levels of PWH, high levels of NWH and NHW-*Negative interaction* group ($n=74;23.9\%$). A third profile was characterized by low levels of all indicators-*Low interaction* ($n=125;40,3\%$). A last cluster was characterized by both high levels of positive and negative WH interactions-*Both positive and negative interaction* ($n=41; 13.1\%$).

Next, we characterized the four profiles according to socio-demographic characteristics. We found more men in the *Low interaction* cluster and marginally more women in the *Positive cluster*. No differences were found across clusters considering age, living with children or with a partner. The *Both Positive and Negative Interaction* cluster was characterized by people working in a hybrid mode and by workers working longer hours ($M=8.96$; $SD=1.83$) than workers in the *Low Interaction* cluster ($M=7.95$; $SD=2.01$). Differences in well-being, satisfaction with the remote work and family articulation and with the perception of having a work environment that is respectful of an individual's time and ability to disconnect were tested and differences were found in all variables. Individuals in the *Negative cluster* showed less general well-being; less perception of respect of their privacy and own time by their company and less satisfaction with the current remote work/individual situation. Contrarily, the *Positive cluster* was linked to the most positive outcomes. Belonging to the *Both Positive and Negative Interaction* cluster seems to be less positive than belonging to the *Low Interaction* cluster.



Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings reveal that most teleworkers are in the *Low Interaction* cluster. This may be linked to the use of stronger segmentation strategies between the family responsibilities and work. It is interesting to note also that more men, who typically are more segmentative, especially from their family life into work [4], are more represented in this cluster. Teleworkers from this cluster perceive their companies as being respectful of their privacy and individual time and are also particularly satisfied with the current situation of telework and family balance. These indicators are similar to the ones shown by the *Positive interactions* cluster. This *Positive interaction* cluster outperforms the *Low interaction* just in terms of general well-being. Thus, it seems protective for the well-being of remote workers to either have high levels of positive interferences or to have low levels of both positive and negative interferences.

Considering these preliminary findings, we can conclude that there are different approaches to work and family balance when in telework. Additionally, it seems to be more protective to avoid the negative than to approach the positive. This may counteract the expansionist hypothesis [10], that participation in multiple roles can provide individuals with greater opportunities and resources that can be used to surpass the negative aspects of multiple-role functioning. However, this can be understood in the specific situation of teleworkers, since when teleworking the boundaries of the multiple roles can be more blurred, thus the effort to reduce the negative is more salient (and protective).

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