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UNPAID WORK AND CARE DURING COVID-19

Subjective Experiences of Same-Sex Couples and Single Mothers in Australia

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This paper draws on data from Work and Care During COVID-19, an online survey of Australians during pandemic lockdown in May 2020 (n = 2,722). It focuses on how sub-samples of lesbian, gay, and bisexual mothers and fathers in couples (n = 280) and single mothers (n = 480) subjectively experienced unpaid work and care during lockdown compared with heterosexual mothers and fathers in couples, and with partnered mothers, respectively. During the pandemic, nonheterosexual fathers' subjective reports were less negative than those of their heterosexual counterparts, but differences between heterosexual and lesbian/bisexual mothers were more mixed. Unlike their partnered counterparts, more single mothers reported feeling satisfied than before with their balance of paid and unpaid work and how they spent their time overall during the pandemic, perhaps because they avoided partnership conflicts and particularly benefited from relaxed commuting and child care deadlines.

Keywords: *COVID-19; work and care: same-sex couples; single mothers; heterodox families*

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected both work and family arrangements. In Australia, it was met with a swift government response requiring all but designated “essential” workers to stay at home. The lockdown edict was underpinned by financial supports. Unemployment

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benefit eligibility criteria were relaxed, and payments doubled to AU\$1,100 per fortnight. To keep workers attached to the labor market where possible, a government subsidy paid employers AU\$1,500 per fortnight to pass on to employees they kept on payroll even if stood down. This payment level applied to both full-time and part-time workers (DESE 2020). Part-time work is very common among women in Australia (ABS 2020). To support essential workers, formal child care was made temporarily free to parents; moreover, schools remained open, though attendance was not compulsory, and most children were kept home (DESE 2020).

The unprecedented disruptions created an unusual opportunity, akin to a natural experiment, to see how an external shock that upended usual employment practices affected paid and unpaid work. Around the world, early findings showed that the restrictions not only created much more household labor and care, but also that men were doing more of this unpaid work alongside women (Carlson, Petts, and Pepin 2020; Sevilla and Smith 2020). This was also the case in Australia (Craig and Churchill 2020a, 2020b). Nonetheless, relative divisions remained wide, and women still bore the major load. That removing the spatial separation of work and home reduced gendered disparity in unpaid work, but not by much, suggests some adaptation but also resilience in gendered norms and practices (Craig 2020).

However, early research on the work–care impacts of COVID-19 has focused on heterosexual couples. What about other family types? The disruptions also give a chance to see how upending usual practice affected unpaid labor in a variety of family forms. What happened in same-sex families where at the core of a couple there is no gender disparity? Did partners think the extra burden the lockdowns caused was distributed fairly? Did male and female same-sex couples feel differently? How did single parents, with no coresident partner to share the extra load, fare? To fill this research gap, we focus on the subjective experiences of managing work and care during the time of COVID-19 in these two types of “heterodox” family.

BACKGROUND

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Men and Women

Theoretically, same-sex couples escape “gender binarism” (Bernardo, Avilés, and Berbén 2018). They are less constrained by prevailing social beliefs about gendered divisions of labor, freer to choose how to divide

domestic tasks. However, researchers do not find that same-sex couples do not “do gender” at all, but rather that there is more freedom to “undo” gendered parenting practices (Civettini 2015; Khor 2007). Consistent with this, same-sex couples have been found to have more egalitarian divisions of labor (Bernardo, Avilés, and Berbén 2018; Sullivan 2004) and to interpret their arrangements as pragmatic and chosen as well as uniquely defined by being enacted in a same-sex relational context (Moore 2008).

Same-sex couples’ divisions of labor are commonly explained by gender theory and economic theory (Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins 2007), echoing approaches in the broader literature (see Bianchi and Milkie 2010). Economic theory explains divisions as a rational function of financial resources and an exchange of goods and services, whereas gender theory sees them as influenced by gender processes. An ideology of fairness is prevalent in same-sex households, and lesbian couples, particularly, actively work to maintain domestic equality in their partnerships (Esmail 2010; Moore 2008). Moreover, if same-sex couples deviate from the egalitarian ideal, female partners have been found to suffer more subjective dissatisfaction than male partners (Bernardo, Avilés, and Berbén 2018), suggesting that housework and child care continue to be forms of gender display (Civettini 2016).

Single Mothers

Relational theories on dividing domestic labor are obviously not as relevant to single- as to couple-headed households but reflect the social assumption that mothers are primarily responsible for care; in Australia, more than 90 percent of custodial sole parents are women (Brady 2019). In Australia, welfare support for single parents to care full time ends after their youngest child turns 6 years old; they are then expected to seek paid work. This is in some tension with the dominant Australian pattern of part-time work for mothers and sidelines the issue of finding time to care, which remains a struggle for many (Brady 2019). Notwithstanding the burdens upon them, Australian sole mothers have been found to match partnered mothers’ time in child care (Craig and Mullan 2012). Indeed, time demands of paid and unpaid work combined on sole mothers have been found to be lower than on partnered mothers (Craig 2005). This could be attributable partly to the domestic work that having a male partner generates; in heterosexual couples, most men are net recipients of domestic servicing, whereas women rarely are (Fineman 2004).

LIFE IN LOCKDOWN

There is reason to expect that all families balancing work and care during COVID-19 lockdown were under enormous strain and doing extra domestic work, but also that there would be differences in the subjective impacts by family type. We investigated through a convenience-sample online survey *Work and Care in the Time of COVID-19*, fielded in May 2020 when Australia was in national lockdown. Of possible respondents, 2,772 completed the survey, and of those 1,100 provided additional open-text comments. The sample was skewed toward women and the employed, and toward the tertiary (postsecondary) educated, as is characteristic of most online surveys (Kellner 2004). To attenuate this bias, results were weighted using estimates from the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics' Census of Population and Housing (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017) to be nationally representative based on age, sex, and highest level of education.

The survey asked respondents about their work and family arrangements before and during lockdown. They were asked how much time they spent on paid work, active care, supervisory care, housework, and household management (for time use results, see Craig and Churchill 2020a, 2020b). Here we focus on subjective experiences, which were probed through questions such as the following: "How often do you feel rushed or pressed for time?" "How satisfied are you with how you divide your time between paid and unpaid work?" "How satisfied are you with how your time is spent overall?" Partnered respondents were asked whether they saw their share of unpaid work/care as fair, and whether they were satisfied with their partner's share of unpaid work and care. We highlight the pre- and during-COVID-19 experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual parent couples ($n = 280$) and single-mother households ($n = 480$), producing proportions and chi-square tests comparing (1) gay/bisexual fathers and heterosexual fathers; (2) lesbian/bisexual mothers and heterosexual mothers; (3) heterosexual fathers and mothers; (4) gay/bisexual fathers and lesbian/bisexual mothers; and (5) single mothers and partnered mothers (of either sexual orientation). (No single fathers responded.) Space precludes discussion of all comparisons, but see the Online Appendix for full tables.

There were very few differences between heterosexual and nonheterosexual mothers and fathers in terms of employment, except for location of work. Nonheterosexual fathers and mothers were more likely to work from home before and during the pandemic than their heterosexual counterparts (Table A1). Compared with partnered mothers, single mothers

were more likely to work full-time and to not work from home at both time points (Table A2).

Subjective Time Pressure

Both before and during COVID-19, fathers of either sexual orientation reported less subjective time stress than did their female counterparts. Before lockdown, there was no statistical within-gender difference in this measure between heterosexual and nonheterosexual mothers or fathers. Levels dropped during the pandemic, but did so more for mothers in heterosexual couples, such that they reported feeling less subjective time pressure in lockdown than their lesbian/bisexual counterparts ($p < 0.05$). The opposite difference emerged for fathers, with gay/bisexual fathers reporting significantly *less* time stress than heterosexual fathers during lockdown ($p < 0.05$) (Table A3).

Almost 80 percent of single mothers reported feeling “often” or “always” rushed before COVID-19; this fell to 49 percent during lockdown ($p < 0.001$). This meant that single mothers felt more rushed pre-pandemic, but less rushed during it, than partnered mothers, for whom the drop was from 70 to 54 percent ($p < 0.001$) (Table A4).

In qualitative comments, many attributed the easing time pressure to working from home, which meant they spent more time with their children but also reduced their commute time, lessening the feelings of being rushed:

I’m loving my situation now with the COVID-19 lockdown. I don’t need to wake up early and get the kids ready for school and make lunches. I’m spending much more time with my kids. (single mother)

This was similarly the case for partnered mothers, although many of them also talked about commuting in relation to their husband or partner, such that he was more available:

Lovely to have my partner to be around. Not having the commute time on his day is excellent. Even though he’s not the main carer, he’s around more. (partnered heterosexual mother)

Some parents hoped to use the same strategy post-COVID, for example,

It has removed the worst part of my day—commuting on Melbourne’s overcrowded public transport. Instead I have that time for exercise and housework. Work time is more flexible too. I intend to keep working from

home maybe two days a week even when restrictions are lifted. (single mother)

Satisfaction with How Time Is Divided between Paid and Unpaid Work

Before lockdown, mothers were significantly less satisfied than fathers with how they divided their time between paid and unpaid work (heterosexual, $p < 0.001$; nonheterosexual, $p < 0.001$) (Table A5). We also observed prelockdown differences between single and partnered mothers, with the former significantly more dissatisfied (58 percent) than the latter (43 percent) ($p < 0.05$) (Table A6). During lockdown, dissatisfaction on this measure was higher than it had been before among heterosexual fathers (up 13 points, $p < 0.05$) and mothers (up 10 points, $p < 0.001$) but did not significantly change for those in same-sex couples. Single mothers' dissatisfaction during lockdown was seven points *lower* than hitherto ($p < 0.001$), reversing the prelockdown direction of difference with partnered mothers (Table A6).

Satisfaction with How Time Is Spent Overall

Prior to lockdown, mothers were also much more dissatisfied than fathers with how their time was spent overall, with significant differences between both heterosexual fathers and mothers ($p < 0.001$) and between nonheterosexual fathers and mothers ($p < 0.001$) (Table A7). Single mothers were more dissatisfied than partnered mothers ($p < 0.05$) (Table A8).

On this measure, dissatisfaction was significantly higher during lockdown than before for heterosexual fathers ($p < 0.001$), heterosexual mothers ($p < 0.001$) and lesbian/bisexual mothers ($p < 0.05$). Many talked about the burden of unpaid work behind this dissatisfaction, such as this respondent:

Combining it [caring] with work, online study and remote learning for a prep and grade 3 and life is difficult [and] we are both pretty exhausted and stressed, basically, with little time to look after ourselves and our relationship. (lesbian mother)

We observed no significant change over time for gay/bisexual fathers, and, in contrast to partnered mothers, the share of single mothers who were dissatisfied with how time is spent overall *fell* 18 points to 32 percent ($p < 0.001$), again reversing the prior direction of difference with partnered mothers.

Fair Share of Unpaid Work/Satisfaction with Partner's Share of Unpaid Work (Couples Only)

In reports of who does their fair share of unpaid work, before lockdown there were significant differences between heterosexual fathers and mothers ($p < 0.001$), and between nonheterosexual fathers and mothers ($p < 0.05$). Almost two-thirds of heterosexual fathers reported doing their “fair share” of unpaid work, but only a third of heterosexual mothers reported the same, with 60 percent reporting doing “more” or “much more” than their fair share. The within-gender perceptions of nonheterosexual couples were more similar, with 65 percent of both gay/bisexual fathers and lesbian/bisexual mothers reporting they did their “fair share” prepandemic (Table A9).

Because of a 10-point rise in heterosexual fathers feeling they did more than their fair share ($p < 0.10$), during the lockdown there were differences on this measure between heterosexual and gay/bisexual fathers ($p < 0.05$), which were not evident before. Lesbian/bisexual mothers were the only group for whom doing “less than their fair share” was higher during lockdown than before it, although there was still an overall difference between heterosexual and lesbian/bisexual mothers ($p < 0.001$), with the former much more likely to report unfairness at both time points (Table A9).

Reflecting the above, before the pandemic, heterosexual mothers were much more dissatisfied with their partner's share of unpaid work than were lesbian/bisexual mothers ($p < 0.001$). No gay/bisexual fathers reported feeling dissatisfied with their partner's share before COVID-19 compared with a small proportion of heterosexual fathers ($p < 0.10$). During the lockdown, more heterosexual mothers than fathers were still dissatisfied with their partner's share ($p < 0.001$) despite a nine-point increase in the latter being also dissatisfied on this measure. There were also significant differences between nonheterosexual mothers and fathers ($p < 0.05$). The former remained less satisfied with their partner's share than the latter, although the percentage of lesbian/bisexual mothers dissatisfied stayed level, whereas the proportion of gay/bisexual fathers feeling this way rose from none to seven percent (Table A10).

Heterosexual mothers commented extensively on their dissatisfaction with their partners' share, not surprisingly given that it had been very high to begin with and remained so throughout. For example,

The balance of work and care has always been unfair in this household—it relates back to when I worked part time and I've never been able to change it. I was able to use the COVID situation to overhaul our sharing of duties.

It's still not fair though and whether I manage to hold on to it once we return to normal remains to be seen. (partnered heterosexual mother)

Neither gay fathers nor lesbian mothers reflected on their partner's share of unpaid work in the qualitative comments, perhaps because of their relatively high satisfaction on this measure. However, some lesbian/bisexual mothers noted differences between being in a same-sex from being in an opposite-sex relationship. For example,

When I was in a heterosexual marriage, we both worked long hours, yet I was the one who did the majority of the housework etc. (lesbian mother).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study we probed the subjective experiences of unpaid work in two types of "heterodox" family: same-sex partnerships and single mothers. We expected that lockdown pressures would be higher for single than for partnered parents, and that same-sex couples would aim to share extra burdens more equally than heterosexual couples.

We found that in some ways heterodox families fared better than heterosexual couples did. Assessments of fairness in unpaid work both before and during COVID-19 were more positive in same-sex than in heterosexual couples, consistent with valuing egalitarianism in divisions of labor (Bernardo, Avilés, and Berbén 2018; Sullivan 2004). There were differences between male and female same-sex couples, however. Lesbian/bisexual mothers were the only group in our study more likely to report feeling that they did less than their fair share during COVID-19 than they had before. Because work status was largely unchanged (Table A1), a possible explanation is that they were unable to do more care work themselves but saw their partners having to do more. This may have caused distress, a reaction some people in heterosexual couples have been found to have when they see their share of domestic labor as unfair on their partner (Lively et al. 2008). Lesbian/bisexual mothers' unhappiness with benefiting from unequal shares is consistent with prior research finding that female couples particularly dislike deviating from the egalitarian norm (Civettini 2016), and that gender socialization extends beyond heterosexual relationships to also affect same-sex couples (Bernardo, Avilés, and Berbén 2018).

This conclusion is strengthened by the report that few gay or bisexual fathers felt dissatisfied with their partner's share, even during lockdown. This distinguishes them not only from heterosexual parents but also from

lesbian/bisexual mothers and implies that concern about domestic shares is less intense and emotionally freighted in male same-sex couples. Prior research suggests that couples may use their financial resources to avoid conflict and dissatisfaction about domestic labor by hiring paid help (Gupta 2007); such outsourcing is common for gay/bisexual couples, for reasons including pragmatism and higher male earnings (Moore 2008). However, help was not so available during lockdown, with most child care centers closed and people prohibited from having service workers such as cleaners to their house. That, despite this, satisfaction with domestic shares was highest in this group, implies that while same-sex couples can minimize gender binarism within their relationship, men and women in these couples still to some extent “do gender” differently (Bernardo, Avilés, and Berbén 2018).

Unexpectedly, single mothers’ subjective experiences during COVID-19 were more positive than those of partnered mothers. Though they were the group most severely time stressed before COVID-19, single mothers reported the most time stress relief and satisfaction with how they spent their time during lockdown. This is consistent with research suggesting the absence of a partner lowers domestic demands upon women (Craig 2005; Fineman 2004), but could also be related to the Australian government support payments to employers who kept workers on payroll while stood down (DESE 2020). Because more single than partnered mothers work full time (see Table A2), they may have been disproportionately relieved of work expectations. Also, their comments suggest they particularly benefited from fewer external daily deadlines around commuting and ferrying children.

However, it was matter of degree. Across the board, parents appreciated not having the daily grind of travel to work, school, and child care. The policy implication is that many families would welcome greater flexibility in work hours and workplace attendance ongoing. Parents, particularly mothers, were under considerable pressure from paid and unpaid work demands before the pandemic; new workplace measures and expectations that relax the temporal constraints upon them would help.

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