Is discourse about flexible working, a mechanism of gender in/equality, changing over time? The case of Working from Home (WFH).

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Flexible working is an organizational practice that can help individuals balance work and non-work demands. Yet, even where flexible work is available, workers who need it don't always adopt it. The low uptake of flexible work relative to its potential has long puzzled scholars who have termed this the 'flexibility paradox'. Such underuse of flexible work contributes to stalled progress towards a more gender-equal division of paid and unpaid work (Sullivan and Gershuny, 2016), and slows the achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality (UN, 2015). The flexibility paradox is a consequential problem that combines individual and organizational factors. It undergirds gendered organizational processes that negatively affect individuals' work and career outcomes. The inter-related supply and demand effects on gender inequality in organizational processes are complex, perhaps helping to explain why they are understudied. This situation has led to a recent call for research (Fernandez-Mateo & Kaplan, 2018) on inter-related processes that lead to gender inequality in organizations. In this research, I respond to this call by studying the inter-related individual and organizational mechanisms involved in flexible working: a factor in organizational gender in/equality. At the individual level, the underuse of flexibility has been customarily framed as a problem of workers not choosing to work flexibly. However, less discussed are organizational level factors such as stigma which may make flexible work unappealing to, or carry costly consequences for workers who use it. I study these factors which operate at the individual and organizational level, and increase or decrease the demand for, and supply of, gender equality by individuals and by organizations. The mechanism that I focus on in this research relates to discourse and narratives about flexible work used to balance work and family domains. I focus on one specific flexible working practice, Working from Home (WFH). I use this extreme case because WFH is the form of flexible work in which stigma is most likely to be visible, given that the home has a strong female association. I operationalize the demand for and supply of organizational gender equality as discourse (the way we talk) and narratives about WFH. I leverage the Covid-19 pandemic, and the sudden and broad changes that it has brought to working practices in organizations. I seek to uncover and understand any changes in discursive and narrative mechanisms over time, given the macro-level impact of Covid (e.g., a change from negative to positive discourse, or from female-typed to gender neutral narratives).

Research question
How has Covid changed discourse and narratives about flexible work, in the specific case of WFH?

Method
Data
The unit of analysis is a fragment of discourse, a 'snippet' about WFH (which could include images). I construct a corpus from snippets of discourse, from archival and interview data, collected 1yr before Covid, during Covid, and 1yr post Covid. *Archival:*

I collect archival text and images; quarterly analyst calls with CEOs; and mass media texts and social media postings including images/ cartoons about WFH. *Interviews:* I conduct semi-structured interviews with 'ideal workers': senior managers with no history of WFH and 'poor workers': individuals with a history of WFH. *Pilot study*: I build upon a July 2020 pilot study of 6 semi-structured interviews and archival texts: social media postings, press articles and company emails (collected March to August 2020). Interviews are conducted sequentially until theoretical saturation.

Analytical Approach

I analyze the corpus using critical discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) and narrative analysis (Boje, 1995, Riessman, 1993; Czarniawska, 2000). I adopt a longitudinal and processual approach to identify change over time in discourse and narratives about WFH. I analyze the corpus dialectically i.e., looking for contrasts that could include: female-typing/male-typing; positive/ negative framing, support of/ resistance to WFH.

Proposed contribution

This research aims to build understanding of WFH as an organizational practice that encompasses gender equality demand and supply effects in organizations. My findings inform how organizations might support a more gender-equal future uptake of flexible work, and greater gender equality in society more broadly - a grand challenge and United Nations sustainable development goal (UN, 2015).

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