GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH BRIEF

An Overview of Work-Life Wellness for Teleworking Couples

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Abstract

A sizeable number of employees throughout Canada are continuing to telework following the COVID-19 pandemic. Couples who telework may experience tension between their work and personal life. Telework may also have positive and negative impacts on work-life wellness depending on employee circumstances. For example, teleworking women with children may be expected to prioritize their home and family over their work. COVID-related restrictions have eased across Canada, which allow for increased freedom around home and work arrangements. It is plausible that a long-term shift towards allowing employees to work remotely full or part-time will occur, and with that, there will be associated changes in family dynamics as both partners adjust to this "new normal." In response to the complex relationship between teleworking and work-life wellness in the context of couples, the first author has proposed a study to research work-life wellness for teleworking couples, addressing the research question, "how do teleworking couples construct and cultivate work-life wellness together?". It is anticipated that this study will foster understanding of work-life wellness in teleworking couples, and inform policies, counselling techniques, and future research.

Keywords: work-life wellness, work-life balance, telework, couples, remote work.

Since the 1970's, remote work and telework have become an increasingly accepted practice by employers across the globe (Oakman et al., 2022). Whereas remote work refers to working in any space other than the traditional office, telework typically refers solely to working from home (Como et al., 2021). The focus of this research is couples working from home; that is, teleworking couples. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking was growing in Canada with around 5% of the workforce being fully remote (Conference Board of Canada, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2021). In contrast, as of August 2021, 23% of employees worked most of their hours from home (Mehdi & Morissette, 2021). Furthermore, eighty percent of new teleworkers are hoping to work partially from home after the pandemic, with equal preferences between men and women (Statistics Canada, 2021). In summary, employees in Canada are increasingly seeing the value of telework and choosing to work from home.

A growing body of literature has begun to delve into the relationship dynamics of teleworking couples. Time spent at work can moderate how work impacts family outcomes such as marital and family satisfaction (Amstad et al., 2011). Individuals may also become emotionally and physically disturbed with their partner's teleworking, as it can infringe on the private sphere (Ojala et al., 2014). Overall, teleworking appears to put pressure on couples by making the tension between work and home more visible and pushing spouses into traditional gender roles. Being around one's spouse may exacerbate existing marital conflicts due to the amount of time couples are in the home (Campbell, 2020; Como et al., 2021; Usher et al., 2020). Even though teleworking can strain the couple dynamic, there may also be hope for teleworking couples to construct and cultivate work-life wellness together. Work-life wellness (WLW) encapsulates two main ideas: (1) feeling well in a variety of domains, and (2) feeling well about the intersection of domains (Como et al., 2021). Work-life wellness is related to concepts such as work-life balance, work-life integration, quality of work life, and work-family conflict. Despite evidence suggesting that partners influence each other's work-life wellness (Amstad

et al., 2011; Çoban, 2021; Ojala et al., 2014; Vitterso et al., 2003), there is a lack of research on how they act together to pursue wellness.

Work-Life Wellness and Teleworking

Telework seems to have both positive and negative influences on work-life wellness (Andrade & Petiz Lousã, 2021; Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). A lack of boundaries (including after-hours technology use), high work demands, and overworking may decrease work-life wellness (Andrade & Petiz Lousã, 2021). Although some people are required to telework because it is mandated by their company, many people choose to telework to increase work-life wellness (Vanderstukken et al., 2021). Teleworking can eliminate commuting and potentially increase personal time if proper boundaries are maintained (Vanderstukken et al., 2021). Furthermore, teleworking may offer access to work for people with disabilities or child-care responsibilities (Cook & Shinew, 2014). Working from home can also be helpful for people who are able to integrate the work and family domains, such as doing laundry during the workday (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). Lastly, telework can increase access to nature by allowing employees to live in more remote areas or having the flexibility and time to go out into nature (Hambley, 2020).

Work-life Wellness While Teleworking in the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated telework, as many organizations required employees who could work from home to do so (Marowits, 2022). Although the transition may have been difficult for some organizations that are new to telework, pre-existing supports, such as assessments, coaching, and workplace design have been available to promote work-life wellness for teleworkers. In particular, leaders who value the personal lives of employees may provide instrumental and emotional support to boost employee work-life wellness (Yao et al., 2021). It must also be recognized that around 60% of the Canadian workforce is unable to work from home due to the nature of their work (Marowits, 2022). This dichotomy between who is able to work from home and who is not may increase resentment and social injustice (Marowits, 2022).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, women did about three times more housework and childcare duties than men (Obioma et al., 2022). Less available supports for women during the pandemic strengthened the need to study gender in relation to work-life wellness (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). For example, due to the closure of schools and daycares, many women have had to work while caring for their children (Çoban, 2021). During the pandemic, women have spent more time on female-typed housework, which is often emotionally and mentally demanding (Obioma et al., 2022). Additionally, some women's career trajectories have been stalled due to business closures and lack of a private place in the home to work (Çoban, 2021). Furthermore, at least 25% of men feel like it is impossible to do their job well from home, and this might be because men are less accustomed to managing both work and home responsibilities (Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2021). Fortunately, COVID-19 pandemic restrictions have now eased in Canada, resulting in more individual and organizational freedom around work arrangements (Oakman et al., 2022). However, in light of the ways that the pandemic may have permanently altered how couples telework and experience work-life wellness, additional research is needed to understand work-life wellness while teleworking in a post COVID-19 world.

Work-Life Wellness and Teleworking Couples

For couples, telework can both create and exacerbate existing gender-based imbalances in domestic responsibilities, career trajectories, and expectations. Women who work from home may experience similar work-life wellness as those who work on site (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). However, teleworking women with children may encounter demands to forego career ambitions for household duties (Çoban, 2021). Social norms may perpetuate women's prioritization of the home sphere, including caregiving

and housework (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). Furthermore, some men may take less responsibility for household chores, citing a lack of knowledge and competency (Çoban, 2021). However, other men may do more household labor when they are working from home compared to when they worked from the office (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001). In contrast, men who telework tend to experience less role conflict (Nguyen & Armoogum, 2021). Men are more likely to have a dedicated private space in the home to work, whereas women may have to work in common spaces with more distractions (Çoban, 2021). On the other hand, some couples may work together to adapt their home environment to accommodate boundary setting preferences for each member of the couple (Holloway, 2007).

There are structural inequities that may perpetuate traditional norms and roles in the home such as the pay gap. In 2018, female identifying employees in Canada earned an average of 13.3% less per hour than male employees (Pelletier et al., 2019). This income gap may lead women to prioritize chores while supporting the man's ability to work uninterrupted, which may, in turn, further the pay gap (Fortin et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, in addition to factors related to the couple relationship, teleworkers' cultivation of work-life wellness may be further complicated by having children in the home.

Work-Life Wellness and Parenting

Some parents, primarily women, may decide to telework to decrease childcare costs (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001), while other parents may avoid telework to keep home and work spheres separate (Zhang et al., 2020). Furthermore, children at home may decrease work-life wellness and strengthen stereotypical gender differences (Zhang et al., 2020). Teleworkers with young children may feel as if they never have time for their family; however, they may still find working from home easier than working from the traditional office (Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2021). Conflict between the work and family spheres may be higher for those with young children due to greater demands for supervision, organization, and assistance with schooling (Goldberg et al., 2021). Additionally, teleworkers with children may believe that they cannot be a good parent and a good employee at the same time (Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2021).

In terms of gender-based equity, women may be seen as the one responsible for balancing the work and family, and their employment may be seen as a threat to their families (Gherardi, 2015). Internally, women may feel obligated to prioritize parenting tasks, while men may feel that parenting tasks are voluntary (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001). In contrast, same-sex teleworking couples may divide parenting tasks more evenly than heterosexual couples; however-

er, inequality may persist depending on the unique circumstances of each couple (Goldberg et al., 2021).

Present Study

As the preceding review of existing research reveals, the relationship between teleworking and work-life wellness is nuanced, especially when relationship and parenting demands are considered. Studying the work-life wellness of couples who are working from home is imperative given that the literature highlights different experiences of work-life wellness for men and women. Telework can increase the traditional division of domestic responsibilities and alter the career trajectories of women (Çoban, 2021). Cultivation of work-life wellness may be further complicated by children in the home (Gherardi, 2015; Goldberg et al., 2021; Ojala et al., 2014; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001; Zhang et al., 2020).

The first author will respond to this situation in the literature using Action-Project Method (A-PM), a qualitative research method grounded in the Contextual Action Theory of career (Young & Domene, 2018). A-PM is particularly well suited for conducting research on couples and families (Marshall et al., 2012). Specifically, the guiding research question is: How do teleworking couples in Canada construct and cultivate work-life wellness together? The first author's thesis research may contribute to a better understanding of work-life wellness in tele-

working couples, and inform policies, counselling techniques, and future research. Ultimately, the research goal is to assist teleworking couples cultivate work-life wellness to strengthen their overall health and well-being.

Participants will be six dyads (12 participants) of Canadian teleworkers and their domestic partners of longer than one year. An advertisement for the study was sent to various professional associations and remote work groups. Furthermore, participants purposively selected to represent a variety of employment situations and backgrounds. The research project will be complete by August 2023.

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