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When work came home: Formation of feeling rules in the context of a pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The shift of middle-class jobs to home settings, which occurred as a result of COVID-19 health measures that also closed schools and daycares, introduced dynamic changes to everyday life. We investigate these changes drawing on data from our study in which participants in Nova Scotia, Canada, who were working at home due to the pandemic, wrote journal entries in response to weekly prompts. Participants not only documented changes to their routines and challenges of managing work and parenting simultaneously and in the same physical space, but also reflected on their conflicted emotions about life during the pandemic and their vision for life as things return to “normal.” Their narratives prompt us to consider these experiences and emotions in relation to Arlie Hochschild’s scholarship on feeling rules, emotion work, and gender and work more broadly. We find that from our participants’ struggle to meet existing expectations on activities and emotion while simultaneously managing new sets of protocols and feeling rules what emerges is a resistance to norms of busyness, productivity, and exhaustion.

The social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada have included shifts with respect to how paid work is performed. While some “essential workers” remained at the workplace and others lost their jobs, many shifted to working from home. Those who took work home in Nova Scotia, Canada, in March 2020, did so as part of public health protocols with unusually strict limits to movement and gathering. By March 28th, approximately 4.7 million Canadians were working from home, a rapid shift from 13% to 39% of the labour force (Statistics Canada, 2020). This matches pre-pandemic estimates that 38.9% percent of Canada’s workforce could plausibly work from home (Deng et al., 2020).

This article examines the formation of feeling rules and consequent emotion work among parents working at home, drawing on journal entries of five participants. Collective uncertainty about which norms ought to organize everyday life while working from home determines our focus on feeling rules and emotion work. The title of our study, “Everyday Life in a Pandemic” suggests a paradox: people were living through extraordinary events, yet mundane life persisted. We explore participant experiences of these temporary shifts in work and home life and their expression through emotions and emotion work. We examine how this may prompt long-term reconfigurations of family and work organization. While new imperatives, such as worrying about viral transmission to others, will likely dissipate, many, such as the impossibility of ‘balancing’ self-care and selflessness or productivity and availability to family, point to an emerging demand for social change to how work is organized and understood. In our analysis of accounts of new and existing feeling rules, we read a desire for such change.

1. Background: Work, feeling rules, and the pandemic

Arlie Hochschild’s scholarship on emotion work and social changes in relation to gender and family at work and in the home has opened new avenues for research and analysis of work and family life. We draw on Hochschild and other scholars of gender, work, and emotion, including emerging scholarship on the COVID-19 pandemic, to demonstrate how, for the people we meet in this study, working from home during the
pandemic represented a period in which rules and norms about how to conduct oneself and how to feel about everyday life were uncertain, and thus facilitated the formation of new and unforeseen practices and strategies that lay bare and challenge many social norms of work and domestic obligations, opening them up to critical scrutiny, skepticism, and reflection.

Within sociology, work is not limited to paid employment, but is “intentional: it is done in some actual place under definite conditions and with definite resources, and it takes time” (Smith, 2005:154). It thus includes care of children or elders, housework, and other typically unpaid labour. Paid employment has long been experienced as incompatible with such work: women’s entry into the labour market in large numbers in the latter part of the 20th century was not accompanied by gender equity in responsibility for the demands of the family (Risman, 2004). Hochschild writes, “This strain between the change in women and the absence of change in much else leads me to speak of a ‘stalled revolution’” (Hochschild with Machung, 2003:12), in which contradictions between increased workplace participation and the persistence of traditional gender norms were managed by a ‘second shift’ of unpaid housework performed by women with ‘day jobs.’ The Time Bond (1997) is a study of apparently ‘family-friendly’ policies, such as flex-work and working from home. In the context of the perennially elusive ‘work-life balance,’ Hochschild identifies an emerging ‘third shift’ of emotional labour. Because there was a convergence of work and family responsibilities for our participants, we extend Hochschild’s work to consider how emotion work is done in paid work and the work of home, and how the pandemic elided feelings about the im/possibilities of achieving a balance between the two.

The current shift to working from home has disrupted that most convenient proxy for doing work, being at work; our findings demonstrate its potential to contribute to radical shifts in how work is defined, supported, and experienced. Trends in working from home have been symptomatic of the stalled revolution, rather than its antidote: instead of promoting women’s entry into the workforce by allowing flexibility, it contributes to expectations of invisible and unpaid labour. Our study builds on research on telework by examining it through the lens of the sociology of emotion, and thus as a site in which to investigate the emergence of feelings and practices that lay bare and challenge contemporary social norms of work and domestic obligations. The call for a shift to ‘telework’—with goals including traffic reduction, decentralization of organizations, and efficiencies in land use—is longstanding (Nilles 1975, 1988; Toffler, 1980); so, too, are analyses of its public and private costs and benefits (e.g., Olson and Prims 1984; Hambly and Lee, 2019). Studies suggest that telework offers increased flexibility, on one hand, and increased exploitation rooted in gender, class, dis/ability, and race, on the other (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Nevin and Schieman, 2020), which contribute to stratified and segregated labour markets (Acker, 1990, 2006; Foster and Wass, 2012; Jarman et al., 2012; Ocean, 2021). Research has shown the persistence of such inequalities during the pandemic (Selden and Berdahl, 2020), as well as the growth in the gender gap in housework and childcare, and to greater mental health issues for telecommuting mothers (Lyttleton et al., 2020). While telework has increased in recent years in some regions and fields (Ellidør, 2019), for many workplaces it took a pandemic to tip the scales. Numerous intersectional inequities persist in terms of who can or must engage in telework and who cannot. These pre-existing patterns have been linked to disparate racial/ethnic health, work, and household outcomes during the pandemic. While our participants are relatively socio-economically privileged, we focus on how privilege does not shield workers from similar concerns about wellbeing and inequality.

When work came home, our participants described how feelings about work and home were not clearly defined, allowing them to reflect on unquestioned and sometimes detrimental practices, such as those that undermined their wellbeing or reproduced inequalities of domestic life. Hochschild’s early research on emotion explains how ‘feeling rules,’ the norms governing what one can appropriately feel and express in a given situation, lead to ‘emotion work,’ the management of feelings towards social appropriateness (1979, 2003 [1983]). Hochschild describes feeling rules as differing across culture, class, and gender, and as subject to change. Further, feeling rules are ideological; we should therefore seek to understand whose interests they serve (Hochschild, 1979). Hochschild posits that we work to match our feelings with social situations in order to follow feeling rules, creating congruity between “what I want to feel, what I should feel, and what I try to feel” (563). Feeling rules become most visible when they are broken. Research on emotion work among populations for whom feelings are in flux has included that on migrants (Bocagni and Baldassar, 2015), expatriate spouses of internationally mobile professionals (Cangià, 2017), and the gendered division of labour (Friedman 2015; Gu, 2018; Whittle et al., 2012). We demonstrate that in the crisis of the pandemic and the context of a sharp shift in how everyday work and domestic life was organized, feeling rules were both uncertain and made visible, revealing disjunctures between lived emotional experience and established feeling rules.

This article foregrounds the formation of roles and relations marked in part by immobility, the sudden turn to being at home, and the consolidation of relationships and experiences in the space of the home. While recent research on the pandemic focuses on the persistence of gender imbalances at work (Qian and Fuller, 2020), it has also extended to investigating a context marked by being stuck at home, where unequal relations persist even when, for instance, both partners are engaged in paid work from home (Calacor et al., 2021; Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2021). Emotion work during the pandemic is the focus of an editorial by Wettergren, Holmes and Manning, who emphasize hope and care as shaping our social world during the pandemic (2020), as well as Gill and Orgad’s (2021) work tracing “positivity imperatives” directed towards women. However, emotion work and feeling rules as they relate to working from home during the pandemic has not yet been a focus of research. We contribute to the growing corpus of knowledge on the social impacts of the pandemic by demonstrating the centrality of feeling rules and emotion work to workers self-understanding of their work and domestic lives (Lupton, 2021).

2. Methods

Over a ten-week period, from May to July 2020, we undertook a study in which participants working from home in Nova Scotia during the pandemic state-of-emergency wrote journal entries in response to prompts. Participants were recruited via social media. An online survey platform was used to collect demographic data and journal entries. Participants were invited to share captioned photos. At least four journal entries were required for inclusion in data analysis. Of fifty-three people who completed the initial survey, twenty-seven completed between four and ten entries. Prompts focused on changes to work, reactions to the pandemic response, and daily life at home. Ethics approval was from [omitted] University.

A tradition of journal-based qualitative study has existed in sociology for over 40 years (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977). Journaling invites participants to share reflections over time yet contemporaneously to their experience, allowing for “nuanced understandings of everyday subjectivities, emotions and activities over time” (Eide and Turner, 2014:242). Journal-based research can foster “proximity to informants’ own frame of reference” and facilitates learning about experiences and emotions that are usually hidden (Elliot, 1997: paragraph 5.1). The ongoing character of the pandemic state-of-emergency meant experiences were best understood by inviting responses over time.

Borrowing Hochschild’s (1997) tradition of exploring cases in-depth, we selected five participants who had written in detail about working at home and were parenting children who were still at home. Combined, the five participants produced 46 journal entries. Participants were between 28 and 45 years old. Three were white, one was South Asian of West Indian and Caribbean descent, and one was South Asian and European. All five had university degrees; three had graduate degrees.
identified their employment as permanent, owned their home (with a backyard), and had partners who worked. Household incomes ranged from $50,000–74,000 to over $199,000. These demographics reflect the relative privilege among those able to work at home (an inclusion criteria).

**Participant profiles (names are pseudonyms)**

- **David** was a teacher. He was a father with shared custody and explained the complexity of managing “a chain of about 18 people connected through their kids” during social distancing.
- **Jeanne** was a public administrator whose husband, who had mental health issues, was self-employed and working from home. They had a daughter.
- **Jessica** was a research epidemiologist. She and her husband, who continued to work outside the home, had one son.
- **Phyllis** worked as an administrator at a non-profit organization. She lived with her husband and their two children.
- **Yanick** was a professor who lived with his partner, who was also working at home and had an immune condition, and their young child.

3. Findings and discussion: Work, family, and feelings during the pandemic

Participants’ reflections on changes to daily work and domestic life introduced by pandemic-related public health measures invite the consideration of new feeling rules and new forms of emotion work. Participants kept their jobs and were not face-to-face with the public, and thus were relatively sheltered from the immediate economic and health impacts engendered by the pandemic. Their primary concerns centered on navigating their roles and relationships: some, such as parent and worker, newly overlapped in space and time; others, such as the responsible public health citizen, became a new source of work. Participants shared their emotional experience, including “secret feelings”: otherwise unshared worries, judgements, sorrows, and joys.

Norms surrounding previously mundane tasks, such as grocery shopping, were in flux, as the frequency of shopping, proximity to others, and presence of children were formally and informally regulated. With so many changes, we found that participants journaled at length about how experiences changed over the study period. Consideration of new feeling rules and new forms of emotion work.

Despite recognizing his previous entitlement when it came to the dishes, he felt stretched, reflecting: “I’ve been amazed to learn how many people have been taking up hobbies and talking about boredom, because [...] I literally feel all consumed by work.” Yanick captures the simultaneity of working and parenting:

The pandemic has been like the thickest [...] molasses, professionally. Research has been impossible [...] Even tying up a few articles [...] has been extremely difficult as hiding in my unfinished and leaking basement to work has not been super conducive to writing. (I’m typing this currently on a broken patio stone hidden in the back corner of my yard while my daughter draws with sidewalk chalk.)

The consequence has been focusing on small and urgent tasks [...].

This tension between a speeding up and a slow-down was a shared experience of pandemic life, as some participants in Moretti and Maturo’s study of everyday life during Italy’s lockdown found that working and parenting at home “accelerated the pace of everyday life” (2021:95), while others felt frozen, particularly in relation to future aspirations. The changes were so dramatic that they “modified the geography of our homes” (Moretti and Maturo, 2021:96). For Yanick, the high-tech context of computers and the internet allows for the low-tech improvised office: a patio stone.

Phyllis laments the lack of time and space to meet the needs of both her job and family.

I struggled to find a work and home life balance and trying to be in two places at once. Still there for my kids and partner yet distancing myself so I could work full-time from the dining room. I set a lot of unrealistic expectations on myself to continue to work a full load and somewhat parent. I was working any minute I could to get my hours in [...] very early mornings and late nights. Within a few weeks I was completely mentally and physically exhausted.

Phyllis included a photo of her living room ([Image 1](https://example.com)). Her qualification “somewhat” used to describe parenting captures the feeling of inadequacy that results from excessive demands on one’s time.

Jeanne’s account of working from home focused on parenting and family. Asked to describe her job, she began instead with her partner’s work and their parenting schedule: “My husband is self-employed so we jointly decided that I would work from 7 to 3 and he would work from 10 to 6 so that our daughter has care and supervision for most of the day. We are committed to getting her outside as much as possible.” The language of “commitment” here indicates how enjoying leisure and 2003:50). Jessica struggled with the inequity and the work of managing her feelings about it:

I’m still doing the majority of the household responsibilities, including child entertainment. My husband has designated himself our household shopper [...], I still have to make the list, plan for meals, put the groceries away and cook. Kinda like the joke about how everyone thanks the ‘man’ grilling at a BBQ, but no one thanks the woman who has done all the prep.

As we look for the punchline to Jessica’s joke, it is clear that her primary feeling about the division of labour at home was in fact frustration (perhaps resistance (Katz, 2004). Her experience mirrored broader patterns in Canada during the pandemic despite policies which were “formally gender neutral” (Fuller and Qian, 2021:209), “divisions of work and care remain strongly gendered” (209). Yanick also reflected on the division of labour: as well as his usual cooking, he was cleaning more, because eating mainly at home entailed more work. He writes:

It makes me thoughtful about how patriarchy operates [...] – in the 15 years or so of our relationship, we never had a dishwasher and never even desired one. But after 2.5 months of basically running between washing dishes and answering emails all day every day, getting a dishwasher seems an absolute necessity.
creating leisure for others have become work. Despite missing colleagues, Jeanne liked working from home:

I have expressed a desire to remain working from home [...] - possibly in a blended fashion permanently [...]. My productivity is much higher [...] because I am not being interrupted by co-workers coming by to be social.

Being able to complete household tasks on weekdays was another positive aspect of working at home. Nevertheless, Jeanne felt overwhelmed by the burden she shouldered. She writes:

My husband works outside of our home and I do feel because I am home, the burden of household obligations is being disproportionately borne by me. Pre-COVID it was probably 60% me, 40% my husband and now it feels more like 80/20. I have expressed my concerns about this to my husband and while he acknowledges the increased burden, he doesn’t seem prepared or equipped to make changes. My husband lives with mental health issues and, while frustrated and feeling undervalued, I am trying to be understanding in an effort to help him maintain a more positive mental health position. I do acknowledge however that it is to my own detriment and I am not sure how long I will be able to continue the trend.

Managing paid work could not be separated from managing family members and household tasks, which required emotion work.

David was the only participant who did not live with a partner full-time; he sometimes lived with his girlfriend and her children. When daycares re-opened, he welcomed the reprieve:

I’m a teacher, so have been privileged throughout all this for many reasons. No loss in job, able to care for my kid etc. But I’ve definitely felt better since my son’s daycare re-opened. Just having some time to myself to do things is important.

While the need to juggle work with family demands and domestic tasks was not new for participants, the shift to working at home created an unprecedented simultaneity of time and space. Participants’ experiences of working from home during the pandemic return us to questions on the “stalled revolution”. Both pre-pandemic and pandemic-related research provides ample evidence of gendered inequities at work and at home (Hochschild, 1997, 2003; Qian and Fuller, 2020; Fuller and Qian, 2021; Hjalmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2021). However, our study points to potential flaws with the stalled revolution as metric and metaphor. Focusing primarily on gender equality in markers like status and income can lead to men and women being equally burdened and exhausted at work and at home. In addition to looking for equality in the division of labour and in work opportunities, participants are evaluating the relative role of work within their lives. In coping with the changes, participants navigated new feelings, and new rules governing them, as we explore below.

5. Feeling rules and emotion work

Participants seldom discussed parenting, housework, or paid labour solely in terms of productivity or time: they related these to emotions and relationships. They described how they were feeling, how they had anticipated feeling, and how they thought others felt. This was an intense time for participants, as a result of the larger context of the global pandemic as well as its immediate impacts outlined in the work narratives above. Writing in the context of neoliberal social upheaval, but making a general point about the disruption and reproduction of social norms, Katz describes how “With so much up for grabs, contradictions were apparent everywhere” (2004:xii), leading to the emergence of “creative strategies” (x). We see creative strategies employed among our participants as a result of lack of clarity coupled with intensification. Phyllis observes that, without childcare or an office to go to, she is “never not mom,” a twin observation to Jessica’s that “I don’t ever feel

Image 1. “I took this photo 2 h into day one at home … hot mess, our lives have literally become a hot mess.”
‘off of work.’” While we see evidence of intensification and exten-
sification of work and parenting roles in work-from-home contexts, what
is underexplored in current literature is how this produces ambivalence
over how to feel about the organization of everyday life (Jarvis and
Pratt, 2006; Kellihier and Anderson, 2010; Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016).
Below, we explore themes of self-care, parenting challenges, secret
feelings, and conflict in relation to emerging feeling rules and demon-
strate that work from home led to new emotion work.

Jessica reflected on how the convergence of work and home, and of
her roles as worker and mother, led to difficult and contradictory feel-
ings. In this passage, she simultaneously experiences pride and regret:

My relationship with my son has evolved […]. He is learning how
hard and not fun it is to be an adult, and I am learning how sensitive
he is, how smart and in-tuned he is to me and my moods. I wish with
my whole heart that I could [be] off during this time, and grab this
once in a lifetime, once in a generation, opportunity to be present for
him. It may be a big regret. There is not one ounce of room to
transition between thoughts that are work-related and being a Mom –
I flash between these two roles in a blink of an eye or a refresh of a
screen.

While school and daycare closures in Canada have been examined for
their impact on the ability of parents to work (Fuller and Qian, 2021),
the experiences of those who were able to continue working also bears
examining. For Jessica, the difficulty of “being present” was a bitter
irony of working at home, one experienced not so much with resentment
but with uncontainable love.

A feeling rule about embracing the changes as an opportunity
emerges here, similar to the positivity imperative identified by Gill and
Orgad (2021), demonstrated in Jessica’s concern over whether she can
live up to this “once in a lifetime” opportunity. The sense that one should
seize the opportunities of this unique time led to feelings of regret
bordering on loss. Although Jessica needed and valued her job as an
epidemiologist, she writes, “I sometimes have ‘job envy’ of those people
who were laid off and got to hang out with their kids for this time.” Many
parents, particularly mothers, were indeed laid off or worked reduced
hours during the pandemic (Qian and Fuller, 2020). These others,
imagined as able to seize the moment, contributed to an emerging
convention about how one should feel — grateful for the time at home.
This reinforces an existing ‘enjoy every moment’ narrative about
motherhood.

The pressure resulting from a convergence of roles within the same
spatial and time was shared among participants, as was the question of
whether one could or should find opportunities within the pandemic.
Changes to participants’ lives were experienced as simultaneously
disaster opportunity. Similarly to Jessica, Yanick notes that “always
working” was a pre-pandemic pattern brought into relief by the
pandemic. He explains that overworking meant that he was
“doing a terrible job of looking after [his] physical and mental health,” writing:

There’s so many ambient health issues happening in my life (not
mine) […] There’s just no time for going for a bike ride or even
regular walks unless I can double or triple up somehow with other
tasks […]. One of the main things that I […] have been doing for at
least 10 years is always working. I mean, always working. I know it
will have a negative impact on my physical and mental health, but
the truth […] is, I literally no longer know how to relax. Relaxing for
me might be laying in a hammock, but I’ll be thinking about 3
different research projects, what vegetables are starting to turn
in the fridge and how to match that with dietary restraints, and prob-
ably answering emails. […] I have all kinds of habits that need to
stop.

Elaborating on stress and self-care, he reflects that:

One thing that I’ve learned about myself is that I’m actually highly
stressed […] My partner helped me to figure that out, in part
because of late I’ve noticed increased blood pressure, experienced
what I now know to be panic attacks, etc. But I didn’t name it as such
and I didn’t think about stress as being physical, only mental.
Blended into […] this is […] the enormousness of structural racism
— not in terms of anything I experience personally, but the ambient
environment of it all in light of police violence and also the need/
opportunity to be out in public protesting on the one hand, and
educating on the other. I see it as simply part of being a racialized
academic that we have to do that kind of work, and for the most part I
have no problem with that, but the constant expectation to pander
to the racial fragility of people in my life at a time of heightened stress is
really too much.

Yanick identifies what he “should” be doing in his approach to ex-
ercise, diet, and leisure, as well as in his work and activism. In ac-
counting for his perceived failure, he vacillates between claiming and
disavowing various pressures: he describes the health issues as “not
mine” before acknowledging changes to his own physical and mental
wellbeing and distances himself from experiences of structural racism
before acknowledging that racialized academics are required to perform
service work and emotional labour, which is well-documented (Henry
et al., 2017). Yanick’s imperative towards self-care was thwarted,
perhaps, by other imperatives: as the “well” person in a family with
chronic illness, and as the tenure-track person-of-colour at work, he felt
called on to be empathetic and capable for others whose experiences of
ill-health or racism seemed more compelling than his own. Feeling rules
on selflessness and on being a provider are at odds with, yet coincide
with, the norm of self-care.

David also framed self-care as something at which to succeed or fail:

I’ve tried to do a bit more meditation, but have only succeeded in
doing it very occasionally. I was diagnosed last year with some
anxiety, and I think being more mindful about things would help.
When the fuller lockdown was on, I made a point of getting out
to walk for exercise every day (which wasn’t that hard because I have a
4-year-old so he obviously needed to go out).

Participant reflections on the emotion work of navigating self-
expectations during the state of emergency are deeply contradictory.
Meeting competing self-expectations and the pain it caused demonstrate
how the pressure to be an ideal worker, who is always available (Acker,
1990), is in tension with norms of ideal parenting as well as the “work”
of self-care, itself at odds with feeling rules on selflessness at work and
within families. The cultural norms to work and to enjoy leisure were
already in tension. The emerging convention, itself paradoxical, that the
state of emergency should be a time to finally prioritize enjoyment
and relaxation exposes the harm of conventions governing self-care, self-
improvement and leisure. The focus on self-improvement during the
pandemic became a source of stress when it could not be met. The
imperative towards positivity and self-care in media targeting women is
explored by Gill and Orgad (2021), who found that such narratives
“failed to address the conditions that produced and maintained our
exhaustion, anxiety and pain” (25).

Parents’ emotion work included navigating the emotional responses
of children to pandemic measures. Phyllis described her four-year-old’s
joy at the news of “bubble merging,” meaning she would soon see her
grandparents: “she instantly started crying!” Yanick writes about his
daughter’s sadness at no longer being able to hear the park bell “bing-
ong” after playgrounds closed. Jessica was devastated when she real-
ized the impact on her son of trying to maintain internalized rules of
behaviour and feeling. Whittle et al. (2012) write that after a disaster,
onordinary emotion work among family members becomes fraught as
everyone, including children, works to ascertain “what counts as
‘appropriate’ emotional expression” (64). Jessica writes:

I have never felt like I had to choose between my job and my son
before. Last weekend, my son had what can only be described as a
melt down. […] Despite being 12, he admitted that he feels lonely all day long. He said he was trying to be really good, and not make too much noise while I work. He said some days he talks to himself just to hear someone else upstairs. He said he didn’t want to add stress to our lives and so was trying to keep all this in. He said he has had no fun or laughter since before March break. He said he wanted to be a man about things, and “suck it up” but he just hit a wall, and was really, sad about being alone again this week. It was gut wrenching, to see him cry and be mad at himself for crying. I just wanted to quit my job and bring some fun back into his life. So while I thought we were managing, it turns out we are not. I don’t know what to do about it. I called in sick the next day.

The juxtaposition between not knowing what to do and the decision to call in sick is striking: with her son in distress, work could wait. However, Jessica is explicit that her employer expected productivity standards to be maintained. A more sustainable way to work and parent at the same time and in the same place, beyond the temporary solution of a “sick-day,” was not available. Despite her high salary and professional accomplishments, Jessica struggled at work due to the intense degree of structure and surveillance.

Amid the sometimes-heartbreaking feelings about the impossibility of being adequate to everyone during this period, another shared focus of journaling was secret joys. Forms of secrecy have long been an object of sociological analysis as sites for generating and shaping feelings (Simmel, 1950), social performances, identities, and relations (Goffman, 1959). Simmel (1950) contends that the secret is not just a private space for preparing public performances, but also a site generating unique and novel qualities of experience.

Not surprisingly given the pressures she reported, Jessica celebrated instances where the pandemic created time. She writes: “I am […] secretly enjoying the lack of organized sports. While I know my son has to participate in sports, it has been great not to have to rush to the rink or soccer field after work. I honestly don’t know how we fit it all in before nor do I know how it will work once it all starts up again.” A feeling rule is that parents, particularly middle-class parents, are to celebrate their children’s involvement in sports (Lareau 2011), hence celebrating their loss becomes a secret feeling.

Phyllis “secretly laughed” at her partner’s parenting struggles when he was, perhaps for the first time, getting a taste of what she had experienced during maternity leaves as a closure in his industry meant that he was working at home with “very little work expected. She writes:

Even when I’m trying to be in work mode, I am still constantly reminded of the fact that the kids overpower all. At the beginning of the pandemic, I had been back to work from maternity leave for ten months. I often secretly laughed at my partner’s inability to function with life at home, he wasn’t really working, and was mostly taking care of our children on his own. It hit his mental health hard, he couldn’t cope with the demands of the children and the reality of not leaving the house everyday … hello mat leave! I feel like he had a glimpse of what I had been through for a year at home with the kids … and really not as bad because I was still at home, just hiding in the other room and often not stepping in to ‘help.’

“Secretly laughing” at her partner was a way for Phyllis to express pleasure at seeing a partial reversal of the gendered norms that had previously characterized their parenting roles.

Finally, feeling rules shifted in relation to the new public health regulations governing life. There was a degree of conflict within participants’ families or communities over when and how these rules should be followed, leading to new forms of emotion work. Jeanne introduces such a conflict. It was early March, and the cancellation of a major work event signaled the public health situation becoming serious. She writes:

That […] week my mother-in-law […] decided to visit us from Ontario. I was livid and it put a tremendous strain on my relationship […]. During that week [Nova Scotia] rolled out social distancing guidelines and my MIL bullied my husband into taking her and our 3-year-old daughter shopping on multiple occasions. I felt awful about it. It felt like we were knowingly putting our child at risk to appease my husband’s mother. I didn’t want to stand up to her and create problems for my husband or cause strain on my daughter. Ultimately, I knew it was a low-risk situation, but it still made parenting and marriage harder than necessary during uncertain times.

Managing the tension between appeasing one’s in-laws and making one’s own parenting decisions is a form of emotion work resulting from long-standing feeling rules around civility, respect, and filiality. In a study of in-law emotion work among Taiwanese immigrants to the United States, for example, Gu (2018) describes how married couples moderated their behaviours and feelings around their in-laws in relation to cultural norms. However, “uncertain times” and the need to navigate new guidelines such as ‘social distancing’ heightened such tensions, as caring about minimizing viral transmission was a new form of emotion work.

While Jeanne worried about the consequences of policing public health rules, Phyllis was aware of the potential to be policed. In the face of rules that she characterized as “gray,” she prioritized maintaining an appearance of rule-following rather than its strict practice:

We were careful to keep evidence of our rule breaking off social media. Not that I overly cared what people thought but knew that there […] could be backlash. I have seen lots of social media bashing around rule following. There was always a little fear around literally breaking the law and knowing that we could face a fine.

Phyllis’s focus demonstrates how public presentation of self was a form of work occurring simultaneously with previously private decisions about social contact.

While no participant experienced an external consequence such as acquiring COVID-19 or being fined, the shifting norms on feeling rules did have consequences. In the following section, we consider the trajectory of participants’ experiences over the study period.

6. From panic to priorities: Finding an ambivalent new normal

A ten-week study period allowed participants to reflect on the initial public health measures, the ongoing realities of working at home in a pandemic, and the relaxing of restrictions as the relatively small first wave abated in the province. Participants wrote about changes in how they spent their time and to their feelings about everyday life in the pandemic. They tended to hold a contradictory sense: they were “burning the candle at both ends,” yet enjoying a more leisurely pace. There was a movement from stress to greater ease, a shift that was captured in their writing about work, home, and their life in their community. This easing over time, however, was not neither uniform nor monolithic.

Working at home created challenges, yet also created opportunities for greater focus and, paradoxically, for multi-tasking, which some embraced. In her final entry, Jeanne writes: “Today is […] my first day back in the office. […] My productivity has been terrible […] because of the number of interruptions.” Reflecting on lasting changes, Yanick echoes Jeanne’s frustration with the interruptions inherent in face-to-face work:

I think that online meetings are excellent and I hope to retain this after the pandemic […] I am […] wired to be multitasking at all times, but that seems rude in an in-person meeting. Not so in a virtual meeting! I’ve been able to wash dishes, water plants, cook dinner, and literally scoop baby poop out of a bathtub with a slotted spoon, all while actively participating in virtual meetings and voting on
constitutional amendments to organizations [...] It seems like an enormous time saver, as in-person meetings require transportation, a good deal of time-zapping pleasantries, and a 2-hour meeting will easily take up an entire morning or afternoon ...

Similarly, Jessica noted that online, “a 1-hour meeting only takes 1 hour instead of two.” Conversely, David found online meetings “exhausting,” and had “no desire to do any more of them.” Participants’ guarding of time stemmed from norms of productivity and collegiality that existed pre-pandemic; working efficiently emerged as one possible solution to the encroachment of jobs into private time and space.

In “The Commodity Frontier” (2004), Hochschild uses the imagery of the ‘ricochet’ to describe unresolved tension on the borders between public and private, the market and the family: “The more the commodity frontier erodes the territory surrounding the emotional care furnished by the wife-mother, the more hypersymbolized the remaining sources of care seem to become” (2004:47). Attempts to solve these tensions during the pandemic by extending the commodity frontier (through online shopping or ordering takeout, for instance) will create further ricochets, not permanent solutions. However, participant responses illustrate a reevaluation of private life, demonstrated not only in valuing limits to meeting length, the efficiency solution, but also in valuing changes to their routines, homes, and communities that created a sense of expansiveness.

Phyllis, who had initially characterized changes to everyday life as leaving her “mentally and physically exhausted,” reflected by her ninth journal entry that despite their drastic nature, the changes had been “nice.” This dramatic reversal, the most notable among the group, was facilitated by working fewer hours. Among workers in Canada during the pandemic, there was a gendered gap in which more women than men worked fewer hours, a pattern most prominent among parents of young children as well as those with limited education (Fuller and Qian, 2021). Phyllis recounted that:

I don’t overly love working Monday to Friday 8:30-4:00. [...] working most days of your life [...] toward those two weeks’ vacation [...] I have been working on my own time, working less hours [...] and choosing when I want to do things.

Later, she added this assessment: “there was a lot of stress and worry at the beginning of the pandemic. They’re not necessarily here anymore.”

Over the ten weeks, Jeanne also found sources of ease, including exercise and home life. She writes: “I love my home more. I’ve always enjoyed it, but it was special to be able to enjoy it and our community in a new way. I hope we don’t lose that.” She recalled: “We are outside for hours every day [...] and [my daughter] will ask to be outside more [...]. I’m so happy about this aspect of our new normal - [...] I am smiling as I type it.” Similarly, Jessica writes “because I can enjoy my yard and garden, I appreciate my home that much more.” David mentioned spending more time going “to the woods or to the beach” with his son as a positive change, attributing it to working at home with no commute. Yanick felt hopeful about building community via a co-op daycare he had helped start and hoped to continue “in perpetuity.” This prioritization of family and home, however, was a private shift, not supported by public efforts; instead, the provincial response to lack of childcare amid continued daycare and school closures was that it could be “solved organically” (Stevenson and Taylor, 2020).

Phyllis was enjoying the outdoors in her own backyard. Her family had recently reconfigured the space, adding play structures and hangout spaces, and she writes: “We are very glad we did! It feels like we have our own little oasis [...] and we have practically been living out there since this whole pandemic started.” She also noticed a shift in her community:

I grew up in a small community where we knew all our neighbors [...] well. We celebrated holidays together, regularly gathered for parties/meals, rode out snowstorms/hurricanes together and played with the neighborhood kids like they were our siblings. Our community was our family. I always knew that this wasn’t necessarily normal in the world that I was growing up in and is even less so now [...]. My partner and I often talk about my childhood and how odd it seemed but also how great it was. How today communities just aren’t like that. [...] That being said, this has definitely brought our little community or street closer together. Our neighbours have been checking in on us, and us them. [...] We have witnessed and experienced neighbors dropping off goodies and care packages [...] . The neighbourhood kids have been biking together [...] . We feel more connected to our neighbors and the people who live on our street.

In a welcome, if partial, return to the close social connections with which she had grown up, what had previously been best described as simply her “street,” had, over the course of the pandemic, become something that she could call a community.

Jessica’s neighbourhood or “street” underwent a similar transformation, but unlike Phyllis she felt she could not participate:

Throughout the pandemic other parents had let their children play together on our street and I would not let my son out to play with them. Since then, there has been a “cooling” from other parents as they let their kids play and I wouldn’t. I would see Moms walking together, and Dads having beer on each other’s lawns. We didn’t participate, so now it feels a little strained.

For Jessica, the pace did not let up: her challenges with “balancing it all” were consistent through the ten weeks, despite her hope for to enjoy a slower pace with her son. She writes:

At the beginning I thought the changes would force us to slow down, to have more family time. I actually hoped it would feel like it does on a snow-day - that we could do less for a little while. But quickly I realized that nothing has actually slowed down. Everything is more frantic, and hyper. My job has not slowed down, my husband is working 10+ hours a day because his job has become even more busy with the pandemic, and we have our son home full time. It is crazy trying to balance it all. I could really use a vacation.

Jessica reflected that there was “nothing fair” about work expectations during the pandemic and adding: “I will be really sad when everything goes back to normal.” Painful emotions and the structure of her job and family kept her from experiencing some of the movement towards ease recounted by others.

By tracing participants’ accounts over time, we learned about a shared aspiration to pause and reset in order to adopt new, less burdensome and less individualized, approaches to work and family. The image of a snow-day evokes a collective retreat from norms of busyness and productivity, while accounts of new joys demonstrate participants’ desire to live in a community (not just on a ‘street’). Participants sought changes that would be permanent, unlike temporary workarounds such as sick days. The vision that emerges is hopeful, yet constrained by a future orientation. Amid the many challenges of the pandemic, one space for potential change has been a collective reorganization of our work and the way our time is structured, including: “attempts at questioning whether the life we live in late capitalism is worth pursuing” (Wettergren et al., 2020:117). It was clear that rather than stoking demand for the return to normal, the experience led participants to reflect on the flawed structures in which they were living and working prior to the pandemic.

7. Conclusion

Social change and ‘unsettled lives’ (Swidler, 1986) cause flux in feeling rules. For our participants, existing expectations around work and parenting were met with emerging feeling rules, such as the admonition to make the most of this time by pursuing connection and
leisure. Our focus on the new feeling rules encountered by participants, and the emotion work that ensued, reveals how shifts in expectations impacted this group of parents, as well as their hopes for lasting change. Given the mainly temporary nature of workplace, childcare, and school closures, there is every likelihood that we will once again face major changes to everyday routines and concurrently to feeling rules. However, the protracted and dramatic nature of changes to work and home life mean that a simple “return to normal” is unlikely: the social transformations we have begun to witness will continue to take shape.

Hochschull’s diagnosis of a “stalled revolution” on gender equity at home and at work is evident in the accounts of participants as well as in the larger economic pattern in which women disproportionately left the workplace during the pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2020a, 2020b). It is also worth asking how the goals of such a revolution might have changed since they were first formulated. Among our participants, resistance to the encroachment of work on home, both in physical space and time, as well as dissatisfaction with productivity imperatives, suggests that while equal status and remuneration at work remain important goals, the personal and family sacrifices currently required are not accepted. A wide range of perceptions is emerging, acknowledging the presence and needs of children to coworkers has become commonplace and unavoidable. Now that we have all seen inside each other’s provisional work-from-home spaces, the “veil” separating family and home, never robust, has lifted. Demand for concrete recognition of the requirements of home and families may be part of the return to the office.

At the same time, emergency social assistance programs in Canada demonstrated that governments can quickly offer large-scale subsidies, a potential inroad for basic income demands. We have learned from the journal entries of workers at home in Nova Scotia during the pandemic that a social reckoning has been occurring concurrent with personal adjustments to routines and values: the shape of a “new normal” has radical potential.

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