

What happened to my time during the COVID-19 lockdown? Parents' subversive temporal regime strategies and their potential beyond the pandemic

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Libora Oates-Indruchová 
University of Graz, Austria

Ildikó Asztalos Morell
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Sweden

Radka Dudová
Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic

Lenka Formánková 
Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Czech Republic

Réka Geambaşu
Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania; HUN-REN Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Hungary

Hana Hašková
Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic

Marta Hawkins
Independent Researcher, United Kingdom

Marta Vohlídalová
Ambis University, Czech Republic

Corresponding author:

Libora Oates-Indruchová, Department of Sociology, University of Graz, Universitätsstraße 15, A-8010 Graz, Austria.

Email: libora.oates-indruchova@uni-graz.at

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted individuals to devise new temporal strategies in various spheres of their lives as a result of the spatial regulations imposed during the first lockdown. We apply Lisa Suckert's theoretical model of 'the capitalist time regime' in the analysis of 68 interviews with parents of schoolchildren in seven European countries conducted during the first COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020. We examine actors' agency and capability to govern time during the pandemic and the extent to which disruption enables subversion of the temporal regime and its five features: measurement and commodification of time, temporal expansionism, acceleration, appropriation of the future, with the special emphasis on unequal temporal autonomy of actors. Expanding on Dale Southerton's analysis of the role of gender in temporal autonomy, we also look at the participants' positions at the intersections of gender, age of children, profession, economic situation, and the use of the welfare system. Finally, we contextualise participants' creative challenges to the unequal temporal autonomy within Barbara Hobson's approach to capabilities and achievements. The results show that participants creatively negotiated time under lockdown spatial conditions, thus producing new socio-temporal conditions that suited them and their families. We identified shift work in family arrangements, time for oneself and increased efficiency due to enhanced autonomy as the key creative subversive strategies addressing unequal temporal autonomy of actors with regard to gender and also other axes of disadvantage.

Keywords

Barbara Hobson, COVID-19, families, Lisa Suckert, subversive strategies, temporal order, time

This article argues that the COVID-19 pandemic prompted individuals to devise new temporal strategies in their everyday practice because of the spatial regulations imposed during the first lockdown. Consequently, these strategies, influenced by, among others, family structure, socio-economic status, occupation, and caregiving responsibilities, contested the established socio-temporal order (Lattanzi, 2021). Despite the flexibility of home offices, parents, especially mothers, found themselves shouldering increased housework and child-care duties, prompting a reconfiguration of daily routines and labour division (Collins et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2020; Liu and Gan, 2024; Nagy et al., 2023). The 2020 COVID-19 lockdown thus reshaped daily life, emphasising spatial considerations in pandemic policies while intermittently addressing temporal issues, such as restrictions on leaving homes (Levrini et al., 2021). Spatial regulations exerted a unique influence on temporal arrangements in work, family, and leisure, resulting in a present-focused suspension of individual time (Levrini et al., 2021). These changes gave rise to sociological perspectives like 'queer time' (Venkatesan and Joshi, 2022) and 'suspended time' (Velasco et al., 2023).

Psychologists explored the varied experiences of time passage during lockdowns. A study in Argentina, for example, found that slowed time and enhanced control were 'associated with being a man, of older age and less physically active', while younger, more

physically active people and women reported acceleration and loss of control (Brenlla et al., 2022). Task load was identified as influencing quicker time passage, while stress and boredom contributed to a slower experience (Nash and Lyon, 2023; Ogden, 2021). Acceleration and loss of control emerged as significant stressors, especially affecting parents during school closures. Moreover, additional parenting obligations during the pandemic impacted family well-being, with disparities based on pre-existing disadvantages (e, g. Angelov and Waldenström, 2023; Eurofound, 2023; Fodor et al., 2020; Kabeer et al., 2021; Koch and Park, 2022; Liu and Gan, 2024; Lyttelton et al., 2023; Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2020; Yordanova and Markova, 2023). This is consistent with earlier findings of gendered time use, with women facing less and fragmented leisure time and more caregiving responsibilities (Asztalos Morell, 1999; Offer and Schneider, 2011; Shaw, 1985) and underscores the multifaceted impact of the pandemic on socio-temporal order, necessitating a comprehensive examination of its repercussions on individuals and families alike (Alizadeh et al., 2023; Eurofound, 2023; Lattanzi, 2021).

We acknowledge the gravity of the findings of this large body of research identifying the negative impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns on family and individual well-being and intend by no means to romanticise the lockdowns. We are also aware that our small study, in which we had to compose our sample of both the countries and the participants by convenience and under severe time pressure, cannot meaningfully contribute to these discussions. Instead, we pose the question whether the rupture in time regimes caused by the lockdowns may have brought into sharper relief circumstances that would allow individuals to re-think and challenge the time regimes in which they found themselves before the pandemic.

The analysis of 68 interviews with parents in seven national European contexts conducted in spring 2020 presented in this article examines actors' agency and capability to govern time during the pandemic and the extent to which disruption enables subversion of 'the capitalist time regime' (Suckert, 2022: 1174). The results show that participants re-negotiated time under lockdown spatial conditions, thus producing new socio-temporal regimes that suited them and their families. We combine the theoretical proposition of Lisa Suckert with Barbara Hobson's (2018) insights into capabilities and achievements. The purpose of this approach is two-fold: to understand how our participants successfully challenged the unequal temporal autonomy during the first COVID-19 lockdowns and to foreground the institutional and policy involvement that would be needed, if the individuals were to maintain these gains in their well-being also outside the COVID-19 'rupture' (Kattago, 2021) of time regime.

Theorising pandemic time

Prompted by the lockdown conditions, Lisa Suckert developed a model of 'a more sustainable temporal order' (Suckert, 2022: 1163), using a literary text, Michael Ende's *Momo* from 1973 (Ende, 2009), as the basis for her theoretical extrapolations. She identifies four features of the capitalist time regime as previously defined by sociology of time in the fictional text: 'measurement and commodification of time, temporal expansionism, acceleration, and the appropriation of the future', to which she adds as the fifth feature 'the unequal temporal autonomy of actors' (Suckert, 2022: 1165). She argues that

the pandemic disrupts this temporal order, redirecting time away from production and consumption. This shift creates opportunities for de-commodified time use (Suckert, 2022: 1171), aligning with a welfare system's prioritisation of care provision (Szebehely and Meagher, 2018) and fostering alternative time use grounded in 'care rationalities' (Waerness, 2019 [1987]). Viewing the pandemic as a clash of conflicting time regimes, Suckert perceives it as a chance to reclaim time and challenge capitalism's temporal order, as the pandemic dismantled the illusion of a predictable future, re-establishing radical uncertainty (Suckert, 2022: 1170). The unequal temporal autonomy of actors underscores the differential control certain actors possess over time, perpetuating privilege and inequality, prompting a call for re-evaluation (Sharma, 2014, cited in Suckert, 2022: 1169). The COVID-19 crisis unveils the persistently unequal distribution of time-intensive care work among genders in families, exposing how capitalist expansionism marginalises and deprives other life areas of available time (Suckert, 2022: 1172). Following Suckert's perspective, we assert that the decommodification of time during the lockdown may have driven innovative sharing of care and work-life balance practices.

To understand how our participants navigated the challenges posed by unequal temporal autonomy in the initial COVID-19 lockdowns, we adopt Barbara Hobson's (2018) interpretation of the capability approach (Sen, 1993). She extends the capability approach to the sociology of gender. She addresses how capabilities are converted into agency achievements, emphasising that the perception of choices may not align with an individual's menu of options. Hobson (2018) highlights the relevance of gender norms and institutions in constraining women's sense of entitlement to claims for participation in employment and care, even if they are equal or greater economic contributors to the family budget (pp. 884–886).

With regard to our argument, Hobson (2018: 887–892) explores the transformation of norms into agency achievements, emphasising factors such as policy implementation, institutional contexts, and the conversion of entitlements into a *sense of* entitlement. She notes the impact of an individual's perception of the state as a problem-solving resource, using former socialist countries as an example of citizens lacking trust in state institutions. Educational level and skills also influence an individual's perception of available alternatives, contributing to socially situated agency within institutional and societal norms. Hobson credits Sen's capability approach for highlighting the widening gap in the distribution of capabilities and agency freedoms.

Applying Gary Alan Fine's (1996) temporal dimensions typology – periodicity, tempo, timing, duration, and sequence (as cited in Southerton, 2006: 436) – Dale Southerton's theory of practice shifts from individuals to practices, while examining participants' constraints, such as gender, age and life-course, and education. Gender impacts domestic labour and motherhood, shaping activities around family obligations; age and life-course constraints hinge on the presence or absence of older children; being related to class, education introduces orientations affecting temporal experiences (Southerton, 2006: 446–449). By aligning Southerton's (2006) theory with Fine's temporal dimensions, we offer an analysis of the inter-relationship between practices and the nuanced experience of time (p. 452). This theoretical framework aids our exploration of temporal dynamics within the context of socio-economic constraints.

Method and sample

This study leverages data from the transcripts of semi-structured interviews recorded with 34 couples (interviewing each partner separately), residing in households with schoolchildren, including one family with same-sex parents. The interviews lasted around 1–1.5 hours and took place in seven European countries – Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Sweden, and England – between April and June 2020. Distribution across countries includes 14 couples in the Czech Republic, 4 in the UK, and 3 couples in each of the other countries. The interviews covered changes in work and family dynamics from the onset of the pandemic, distinctions between workdays and weekends, alterations in family spatial, financial, and material circumstances, sought-after support structures to manage responsibilities amid pandemic conditions, encountered challenges, and any positive impacts of the lockdown on the participants and their families.

Most interviews were conducted online, several in person. Acknowledging the constraints of a convenience sample, necessitated by recruiting the research team and participants within a short time frame before the conclusion of the initial lockdown, this study embraces a diverse range of countries with distinct regimes and policy measures during the pandemic's first wave. The participant sample is skewed towards higher educational attainment, middle-class status, and urban residence. Challenges in reaching interviewees without online communication access and those facing extreme circumstances resulted in a less diverse participant pool. Notably, there are fewer participants with primary and secondary educational attainment, lower economic status, and rural residence. The sample is nevertheless sufficiently varied for the purpose of qualitative testing of Suckert's theoretical proposition, which is our aim in this article.

To complement the interviews and sensitise the participants to their use of time, we employed an online questionnaire and a 24-hour time use diary modelled on Harmonised European Time Use Surveys (HETUS)¹ and designed in Google Sheets. The questionnaire gathered demographic data and probed participants on their perceived time allocations for various activities before and during the pandemic. In addition, we collected COVID-19-related policies for each country until June 2020 to contextualise the interview material.

We covered some of the diverse interview material and a systematic analysis of one country in an earlier publication (Hašková et al., 2022). For the purpose of this article, we searched only for the instances where the participants expressly identified a gain to their well-being related either to a disruption of, or their own challenge to, the temporal regime. We consider these as illustrations of the *potential* to subvert the five features of Suckert's capitalist temporal order with a particular emphasis on unequal temporal autonomy of actors. They were a fairly small body of utterances, because all the narrators spoke at length about the various constraints and hardships that the lockdown brought them and only here and there about positive experiences. The most frequent practices of achieving a gain vis-à-vis the time regime could be grouped under 'shift work in family arrangements', 'time for oneself', and 'increased efficiency due to enhanced autonomy'.

Practices that subvert time regimes and improve well-being

Shift work-family arrangements

The adoption of ‘shift work’ in family arrangements was a notable innovation observed across the sample. These involved mutually agreed alternating shifts of care work and paid work, ensuring a gender-equal distribution of time for care and uninterrupted periods for paid work and personal activities. A Hungarian academic scholar, father of two children, sharing responsibilities with his academic partner, exemplifies this approach as follows:

‘I worked on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and my partner on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. While the whole family stayed at home, one had the responsibility for the children while the other could focus on work’. (Levente, employee, 2 children, aged 6 and 8)

During the challenging conditions of the lockdown, the adoption of shift work-family arrangements empowered parents with small children to take control of their time. This not only allowed them to experience meaningful moments with their children, as several of our narrators explicitly mentioned, but also provided uninterrupted periods for focused work and personal endeavours, as their partners assumed household responsibilities. Parents, such as a university-educated mother from the Czech Republic, highlighted the resilience and improved mutual understanding within couples fostered by the shift work-family arrangement during the lockdown. This was evident also in the account of a Czech couple, both freelancers in different fields, who embraced full-time homeworking. While having the autonomy to work from home (at least for one of the partners) was a prerequisite, the active pursuit of equitable engagement in practical chores emerged as a crucial factor in establishing these arrangements. Couples alternated childcare shifts daily or weekly, consciously striving for more temporal autonomy.

Importantly, there was a disparity between those who could challenge gendered labour divisions and those constrained by socio-economic resources. Educated participants who were working remotely had more agency to create their own pace, space, and balance between professional and family time. This was exemplified by a Czech university-educated father, emphasising the sustained potential for decommodification of time through the adoption of a shift work-family arrangement:

‘I was able to concentrate on more important things than the job (. . .) it was a kind of a regimen that I would have loved all the time (. . .) whoever wasn’t with the kids was trying to work, we took turns day by day (. . .) I am a bit delayed but not that I feel pressured, and I feel I have an excuse, like perhaps everyone, that it just hasn’t been possible to commit to your job fully’. (Zdenek, employee, 2 children, aged 7 and 3)

Taking the pandemic as an excuse to create unique terms and conditions for work and family arrangements resonates with Kattago’s (2021) understanding of the lockdown time as a ‘rupture’. Customary daily activities were put on hold and work and private spheres blended into a continuum, ushering people into a temporality characterised by a

'continuous present' and a momentary suspension of the future (Kattago, 2021: 1402–1411). Accordingly, some of our participants felt freer to shape their own temporality and work commitments while occupying an alternative reality with less pressure and guilt. Nevertheless, the lockdown 'rupture' brought opportunities to subvert the pre-pandemic status quo to the benefit of those who possessed the agency and capabilities to shape the unprecedented reality. The particular prerequisites for the adoption of shift arrangements included egalitarian gender attitudes, employment with time flexibility, remote work opportunities, and the privilege to determine one's work pace. A Hungarian academic couple adopted a shift arrangement, accommodating their gender equality, although they both expressed frustrations over their reduced productivity in their preferred task – research publications (Levente and Ingrid, employees, 2 children, aged 6 and 8).² In contrast, an English working-class couple found themselves stuck at home and arguing over childcare and home-schooling. In settings where schools and care facilities remained closed long-term, couples with more resources could challenge traditional inequalities, fostering resilience and well-being in the face of adversity. The 'more resources' is key here, as Liu and Gan showed in their US study: the pre-existing gender gap in parenting time increased in families with lower educational attainment and income (Liu and Gan, 2024). Importantly, the national pandemic policy conditions impacted the agency of the parents. Sweden, which imposed minimal closures and kept state care services uninterrupted, stands out in our sample for its deviation from the familialist norm. However, even in more familialist societies (for four types of familialism see Leitner, 2003) like Hungary or the Czech Republic, some highly educated couples challenged gendered time norms, leveraging their autonomy over work performance to adopt shift strategies (e.g. Zdenek above).

The overall beneficence of shift strategies was recognised across our sample in the seven countries. This resonates with the findings in Shockley et al.'s (2021) study of dual-earner couples in the USA during the COVID-19 lockdown, indicating that parents who took turns in sharing responsibilities maintained better well-being and occupational performance compared to those who did not engage in shift strategies. Besides, we found that women who worked from home and took on most of the caregiving in their families reported the lowest well-being and self-evaluated occupational performance. The subversive production of temporal modes, exemplified by shift arrangements, not only facilitated fathers' appreciation of newfound caregiving time, but also promoted gender equality in temporal autonomy, contributing to higher well-being and resilience in adverse conditions.

Time for oneself

Parents navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 lockdowns found themselves grappling with a scarcity of personal time, an aspect of life exacerbated by increased household responsibilities. Our sample shows unequal distribution of personal time, particularly in terms of quality and duration. Despite the strain of amplified caregiving duties, the reduction in social engagements and commuting, coupled with more flexible work hours, motivated many parents to explore new activities, such as exercise, art, contemplative walks, jogging, or meditation. These interviewees articulated their positive impact within

their daily self-care and wellbeing routines, which they reported as having increased in comparison to the pre-COVID times. However, in families where the time budget was exceptionally tight, leisure moments, especially for women, significantly diminished. Our interviews illuminated variations in how partners navigated their entitlement to personal time, including its duration and scheduling. The concept of ‘time for oneself’ signified the time periods without children when parents could engage in activities of their choice with more control and freedom. Still, being dependent on one another intensified the reliance on collaborative efforts, which overall perpetuated a gendered dynamic shaped by familial norms. A distinct pattern emerged wherein men exhibited a heightened sense of entitlement to personal time, while women found themselves succumbing to traditional gender paradigms, assuming a disproportionate share of housework responsibilities. This discrepancy foregrounded a nuanced dynamic of individual navigations of roles and privileges, based on their (un)articulated gender expectations. It also aligns with Hobson’s (2018) assertion that norms play a pivotal role in mediating between perceived alternatives and the sense of entitlement and agency.

In contexts where women traditionally shoulder primary caregiving roles, men often assumed their right to personal time, while their partners endorsed this sense of entitlement:

‘It was great that my husband could stay with his father (. . .), he had some space to relax there. He works in an office now (. . .) the major negative challenge for him was (. . .) the loss of the calm working place. While I am able to work [at home, in the small apartment] in shorter periods, with interruptions (. . .), he is not, and it is a source of great stress for him. So, I think the stress [linked to COVID-19 lockdown] had a much worse impact on him’. (Aneta, Czech Republic, self-employed, 1 child, aged 12)

Aneta adeptly accommodated her partner’s preferences for the timing and duration of his ‘time for himself’, justifying the arrangement with a diagnosis of her husband’s greater emotional strain. Despite his prolonged leave from work, it was Aneta who delivered the overwhelming portion of ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild and Machung, 1989) in the family – caring for their daughter, managing household responsibilities, and tending to pets – as well as doing her own paid job. Other women in this research articulated a similarly compliant approach.

However, the overwhelming sense of tiredness prompted some women to challenge this unfairness and reclaim some autonomy over their time. Adéla, working remotely, spent a lot of her time supporting her daughters in online schooling. To manage these increased responsibilities, she adjusted various aspects of her work: reduced its duration, shifted work to late-night hours, and adopted an irregular work schedule. Only at the point of total exhaustion, did she feel entitled to ask her husband to get involved in their daughters’ education. The crisis produced a sense of entitlement, consequently, Adéla was able to initiate changes in the family dynamic and regain some control over her personal time. However, she took it for granted that the man would choose the activity he enjoyed, while she would handle the rest:

‘We [me and my daughters] tried to catch up with distance schooling and it was beyond my abilities to manage it; so I told my husband that he had to take part in the school work with the

older one. So, (. . .) we divided it. He is doing maths exercises because he prefers maths'. (Adéla, Czech Republic, employee, 2 children, aged 10 and 8)

In contrast, couples practising shift work-family arrangements during the COVID-19 lockdown showed a shared sense of entitlement to claim 'time for oneself' from the start. The ability to alternate in care responsibilities through a negotiated schedule, coupled with respect for each other's needs, allowed regular access to personal time, whether for work or leisure, for both men and women. The 'shift model' empowered both partners, fostering a sense of control over the duration, timing, and periodicity of their individual time, accompanied by a sense of entitlement to this time. This mutual acknowledgement of the right to both work and personal time became essential in organising work/care schedules during the pandemic crisis, challenging the unequal autonomy of time within the couple.

Increased efficiency due to enhanced autonomy

During the lockdowns, the conventional capitalist time regime centred on growth, acceleration, and efficiency clashed with the symbolic and literal 'halting of time' (Suckert, 2022: 1166). In agreement with Suckert's postulation, we observed that the lockdown measures had opened avenues for more autonomous time use – for some. Where the families had a greater autonomy, they navigated a more fluid and adaptable environment and departed from the rigid structures defining their pre-pandemic daily lives. Boundaries between professional and personal life within households became increasingly blurred, allowing parents and children to manage their daily tasks in a manner that suited their individual circumstances. The structures governing household activities, such as school drop-offs, extracurricular activities, and structured playdates, transformed as families adapted to remote work and online learning became the new norm. This allowed more privileged participants to choose those activities they deemed most important or relevant and focus on them. For example, participating in voluntary unpaid work to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in the local community became a special form of utilising time:

'During the lockdown, I was very busy at the Church. The Church set up a coordinating body against the spread of COVID (. . .). This has been, I think, one of the biggest gifts of the pandemic, that it provided us with enough tasks. (. . .) We did not spend precious time doing nothing. I got to feel that what I did was indeed useful and important'. (Gábor, male, Romania, employee, 4 children, aged 5, 11, 11 and 13)

Gábor still sees time through the lens of capitalist morality as a 'precious' commodity meant to be spent effectively. 'Doing nothing' would be wasteful, but engaging in work is the 'biggest gift'. Nevertheless, this understanding of time-use morality subverts the elevated status of productive work, emphasising the significance of reproductive or care work in maintaining social order. This corroborates the findings of Aksoy et al. (2021), who reported an upsurge in altruistic activities amid the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the instances of altruism, the interviewed families predominantly adhered to the established capitalist norms of time utilisation. Emphasising the significance of time

efficiency, they prioritised effectiveness in completing paid work. Consequently, families often framed time efficiency within an increase in work intensity, facilitated by a smoother workflow without interruptions. Yet, the newly found temporal autonomy, particularly because of the elimination of commutes, where that was the case, allowed for greater flexibility in determining the duration and scheduling of work activities, contributing to an enhanced perception of efficiency in accomplishing tasks and, by extension, personal well-being (see also Eurofound, 2023 for a similar finding).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a study by Raišienė et al. (2020) found a strong gender dimension in the evaluation of efficiency of work and the approach to work. The authors found that men working during the lockdowns frequently complained that their efforts were frustrated by other members of the household, while women appreciated being more independent, applying time management and personal leadership skills. For some women, working remotely from home brought about new gains that they could not imagine before, like in the case of the Czech woman who enjoyed her home office conditions:

‘I have my space to work. My working conditions have improved in the end (. . .) I do only the key activities, the others were cut off’. (Klára, employee, 2 children, aged 7 and 3)

Here, the effectiveness in delivering paid work relies on having access to ‘a room of one’s own’ (for the application of Virginia Wolf’s term to the lockdown conditions in families, see Hašková et al., 2022). Thus, the unequal temporal autonomy – meaning different levels of freedom to choose one’s own pace of work – is significantly influenced by the availability of a dedicated workspace. Similarly, a mother from Austria highlights the positive aspects of working away from a traditional office:

‘The efficiency is more about the work conditions, because in the office, we have an open space, we have a flexible desk office, (. . .) and at home, I am closing the door, I start at whatever time, 7:45 or 8 or so, and then it goes through, until lunch break, and then till the evening, so there is no interruption, actually. That’s why, time – from a timing perspective, I work more, and probably it’s more time efficient as well. *laughs*’ (Johanna, Austria, employee, 2 children, twins aged 13)

Yet for other women in the study, creating their own office space was not possible and they had to share with the rest of the family, or adjust bedroom, kitchens, or even garden sheds to their professional needs. Men tended to have more leverage to determine temporal and spatial conditions for their remote work than women. As Suckert (2022: 1169) asserts, the extent to which individuals must adhere to or can comply with capitalist imperatives is heavily influenced by their social position and power resources, traditionally shaped by gendered monetary capital. In this research, control over one’s time and space during the lockdowns has also proven to be predominantly defined by class and gender across all seven countries.

Nevertheless, increased autonomy over one’s time could also lead to diminished efficiency. Participants accustomed to having their time organised through work or family arrangements found it hard to adapt to greater autonomy and freedom. In accordance with

Suckert's (2022) argument, their attitude to time was moulded by the temporal logic inherently embedded in the conditions of a capitalistic economy, rendering its relinquishment disorientating and even depressing. For example, an English couple with two schoolchildren, who were used to being employed away from home and having their schedule tightly organised by external circumstances, such as school pick-ups, after-school clubs, preparing for work, weekends, and holidays, socialising at certain times, or fulfilling caring responsibilities, could not easily adapt to the unprecedented conditions of the lockdowns:

'The biggest thing, was having the children home and having to. Yeah, try and educate them and keep some kind of semblance of normality for them. Getting up, breakfast, getting dressed, all days, just those normal cornerstones of a child's day and of a family's day. To try and keep things kind of as normal as possible'. (Dawn, UK, employee, 2 children aged 6 and 9)

They struggled to motivate themselves and the children to stick to the schedule that was their own invention, rather than a structure imposed on them. While trying to keep an optimistic façade for the children, the wife found the confined lockdown life disheartening. Due to unfolding depression and insomnia, she had to detach herself from key chores, which were taken over by the husband. The fear for their lives substantially disturbed family life and deregulated established habits and prior efficiencies. Children lost their school and bedtime routines and parents did not have enough confidence and energy to recreate them within the unregimented environment. Characteristically, consumption of alcohol and cigarettes among some of the participants increased, even those who did not have such addictions before the pandemic. These substances offered a temporary relief and the sense of being liberated from the COVID-19 regime on one's own terms.

Although the COVID-19 crisis pushed couples towards creating their own internalised pace of time, the potential for subversion of the capitalist temporal order by using time on their own terms was not entirely utilised. From Elias' (2007 [1984]) perspective (as cited in Suckert, 2022), people in capitalist societies experience 'self-restraint' which represents an intrinsic economic force exerting the logic of saving and rationalising time. In Southerton's (2006) argument, routine is valued over spontaneity. Submitting to or abandoning gendered roles and familial norms illustrates some of the internalised ways of maintaining the safety and predictability of preestablished logic. Nevertheless, the increased autonomy of families enabled them to remain together in a close, albeit overwhelming manner, which subverted the prevailing order of allocating time primarily to production. This shift challenges the notion that reproductive care work falls outside the realm of 'efficient time', granting some parents more autonomy to enjoy family time in ways unattainable in pre-COVID-19 times.

Towards 'a more sustainable temporal order'?

Lisa Suckert (2022) calls for 'a more sustainable temporal order' (p. 1163) in her postulation of a model of five features of the capitalist time regime. We focused on the last of these features, 'the unequal temporal autonomy of actors' (Suckert, 2022: 1165) and identified three areas where participants resourcefully addressed constraints on their temporal autonomy: shift work-family arrangements, time for oneself, and increased

efficiency due to enhanced autonomy. We can say that our research confirms, with empirical material, Suckert's theorisations of unequal temporal autonomy and resonates with Hobson's (2018) capability approach ('a sense of entitlement to make claims', p. 883). In the three aforementioned areas, gender is a crucial factor in the temporal arrangement of daily activities amid the lockdown. Expanding on Southerton's analysis of the role of gender in temporal autonomy, we employed an intersectional lens and considered participants' positions at the intersections of gender, age of children, profession, economic situation, and the use of the welfare system. This approach explicates instances of creative innovation prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic that challenged and disrupted the capitalist time order and potentially bolstered the resilience and well-being of parents in crisis situations. We need to bear in mind, however, the overall context of a substantial increase in reproductive work in families with small children during the lockdown, placing a disproportionate burden on mothers (Collins et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2020; Kabeer et al., 2021; Liu and Gan, 2024), particularly in gendered familialist contexts, such as the Czech Republic or Hungary in our sample.³ In these cases, the increased presence of fathers at home, while contributing to a greater involvement in reproductive work, often allowed them more freedom compared to mothers. Despite the challenges, the lockdown spurred some innovative solutions that have addressed existing inequalities. In congruence with Hobson's (2018) argument, our analysis has shown that those solutions fostered a sense of empowerment and temporal autonomy among actors in our sample, which was limited to families that did not suffer extreme time poverty during the lockdown. This is in contrast to single-parent families or families with children living with disabilities, for example (see Hertz et al., 2021; Varegue et al, 2022).

Notwithstanding the challenges imposed by spatial and temporal constraints, some of our interviewees perceived the first COVID-19 lockdown as an exceptional period, offering a respite from previous experiences of time poverty, work–life imbalance, and burnout. The increased flexibility during this period allowed these individuals, especially women, to align daily schedules more closely with personal or family needs. Abstract measurements of time lost their significance, as conventional milestones disappeared with the closure of schools, offices, and factories (see also, e.g. Lattanzi, 2021; Nash and Lyon, 2023). Days became indistinguishable for many, providing an opportunity to establish new rituals and personal temporalities, deviating from the established capitalist temporal order. Even in some households where parents juggled full-time employment and school tasks, the reduction in school expectations, with no extracurricular activities, no commuting, and flexible task organisation contributed to a perceived abundance of time. Needless to say that it did not apply to all and that the degree to which the respite was possible depended on the availability of space, material security and policy and institutional contexts. For example, while Austrian COVID-19 measures were far from egalitarian, they emphasised the need of parents to remain economically active, provided caring facilities for children and moved school classes online. In contrast, the measures in the Czech Republic exploited gendered models of care and closed the schools for an extended period, relying on families to cope. The introduction of online education was delayed, if provided at all, during the first lockdown.

One positive aspect of the lockdown was the unprecedented opportunity for family members to spend quality time together (see Shipman et al., 2024 for a discussion on the

double-edged nature of family life during the first year of COVID-19), if the material and emotional circumstances allowed it. Shared meals and leisurely board game afternoons enriched family life, validating women's caregiving roles and allowing for the joy of togetherness. However, the newfound temporal freedom for parents was intricately linked to the needs and schedules of their children, creating a unique temporality that revolved around the presence of children. The ability for women to compensate partners and children with time previously spent on paid work was viewed as an unexpected gift by some of our female participants in familialist contexts, countering years of perceived time scarcity and aligning with intensive motherhood ideals (see also Somogyi et al., 2023).

Despite exhaustion and fear, narratives also highlighted positive aspects of the lockdown. The transformed temporality was viewed as an opportunity to redefine lifestyle patterns. For some, incorporating positive changes from the lockdown became future projects, contributing to the 're-appropriation of the future' (Suckert, 2022). However, many parents feared the long-term negative impacts on their children's mental health and academic achievements during the pandemic.

Initially, participants perceived the first lockdown as a deceleration of time, akin to 'forced deceleration' (Suckert, 2022: 1171; referencing Rosa, 2020). Positive evaluations waned as financial insecurity grew, leading to negative perceptions and a sense of 'temporal vertigo' (Perroy et al., 2022). Our participants' days felt both slower due to repetitive family activities and faster due to simultaneous home-based work and child-care responsibilities. Parents adopted strict schedules to manage time, sacrificing personal free time for meticulous planning. Parents overseeing the online education of younger school children, especially those with attention-related challenges, confronted heightened supervision responsibilities. In contrast, parents of older school children, recounted a more manageable situation, where their children independently utilised the time gained for their own activities, without requiring parental assistance.

Moreover, the latitude to effectively alter the pace of time was influenced by the anti-pandemic measures implemented at the national level. In Romania, for instance, the initial weeks of post-institutional closures were designated as Easter vacation, extending the customary two-week break. This extension proved instrumental in affording families with children an interval of respite. The pandemic confronted temporal expansionism, shifting public time back to private spheres due to the impossibility of outsourcing care and housework. Parents, particularly mothers, became more entrenched in unpaid work (see, e.g. Eurofound, 2023), with constant household presence amplifying tasks. This was exemplified by increased workload in cooking, cleaning, and washing up during the lockdown (see also Fodor et al., 2020; Eurofound, 2023). Gender emerged as a pivotal determinant, demarcating those who could navigate the pandemic with relative ease and those whose burdens escalated dramatically (e.g. Liu and Gan, 2024). Women, still generally presumed to shoulder the bulk of reproductive work, found their workload increased and time constraints exacerbated (see, for example, Angelov and Waldenström, 2023; Hertz et al., 2021; Lyttelton et al., 2023; Varengue et al., 2022). Economic standing and occupational roles also played a defining role in shaping individuals' temporal experiences during the lockdown (Angelov and Waldenström, 2023; Brenlla et al., 2022; Kabeer et al., 2021). Those grappling with income uncertainties or adjusting to evolving work conditions, especially within the healthcare sector, found themselves unable – both

literally and metaphorically – to decelerate (e.g. Angelov and Waldenström, 2023). The age of their children further accentuated the complexity of their temporal predicament.

The exploration of shift work-family strategies amid the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a nuanced interplay between societal structures, policy interventions, and individual agency in shaping the temporal autonomy of parents in our sample. The impact of welfare contexts becomes evident as we examine how the timing of school and care facility re-openings directly influenced the time constraints on employed parents. Paid leave for carers during closures emerges as potentially enhancing temporal autonomy by providing relative economic security while maintaining a legal entitlement to the labour market (see, e.g. Angelov and Waldenström, 2023, Eurofound, 2023 and Alizadeh et al., 2023 for findings with these implications). Although, as a familialist measure, it results in shifting the burden of care onto families and such policies may inadvertently contribute to reinforcing gendered rhythms of life, thereby limiting autonomy, especially for those primarily engaged in caregiving roles.

Finally, the decommodification of time (Suckert, 2022), emphasising socialisation and also pleasure, was facilitated during the pandemic. Lockdown measures provided some of our participants with the opportunity to prioritise family time without feelings of guilt, justified by the pandemic circumstances. This exemplifies a lived resilience to the capitalist time regime (Suckert, 2022) through the creative use of time, including engagement in free-time activities, personal fitness, home maintenance, new hobbies, and enhanced online socialising with friends. However, it is essential to note the potential gendered nature of these outcomes, with women in our sample more frequently mentioning the allocation of extra time to children and household chores. These strategies afforded participants a renewed sense of control over the duration, timing, and periodicity of their activities, coupled with a pronounced entitlement to efficiency in time use.

Conclusion

In our examination of parents of school children during the first COVID-19 lockdown, a discernible disparity emerged in their ability to navigate or deviate from the conventional capitalist temporal order. The gendered dynamics of time came to the forefront, showcasing a stark contrast in the claims made by women and men. Women often articulated their need for time for themselves in moments of extreme exhaustion, highlighting the traditional gender order that compelled them to reach a breaking point, before asserting their right to personal time. On the other hand, men tended to assert claims for uninterrupted time dedicated to paid work, especially in the context of home office arrangements. This reveals the entrenched workings of the traditional gender order that shape how individuals, based on their gender, negotiate and assert their temporal autonomy.

Efficiency in paid employment was intricately linked to flexibility granted to employees. The study highlights the need for policies that acknowledge diverse temporal and spatial work routines, moving beyond rigid structures like the traditional 9-to-5 office time across all seven countries. The capability framework introduced by Hobson (2018) underscores the importance of personal resources, institutional support, and work conditions in enabling individuals to make claims for their temporal autonomy. The policy

recommendation arising from this observation is clear: fostering flexibility and trust in employees' ability to manage their time can lead to increased efficiency and satisfaction.

The study unveils a paradoxical tension between the capitalist time regime and de-commodified forms of the temporal order. The shift of care responsibilities back to families during the lockdowns brought to the forefront the conflict between the values of the care logic and the demands of instrumental rationality or the logic of capitalism. This conflict manifested differently for men and women, contributing to varied experiences of increased freedoms or overwhelming workloads.

Our research has limitations stemming from the predominantly privileged social background of the participants, a consequence of recruitment being restricted to our immediate circles due to lockdown constraints. We recognise that the pandemic's impact on families varied significantly based on socio-economic status. For instance, single parents or lower-income families faced greater challenges in time management and resource access, in contrast to couples with more financial and emotional support. Interestingly, despite socio-economic disparities across the countries, our comparative analysis reveals consistent patterns. Although we would typically expect different outcomes in countries with varying social support systems, the unprecedented nature of the pandemic seemingly equalised some disparities, highlighting a need for families to devise creative solutions for using time. This research thus underscores the interplay of socio-economic factors and creative resourcefulness, offering insights into the resilience and adaptability of parents across Europe during the pandemic.

In conclusion, the study joins in with similar existing findings (Alizadeh et al., 2023; Eurofound, 2023; Kabeer et al., 2021) in advocating for nuanced policy responses that acknowledge the intricate interplay of societal structures, gender norms, and individual agency in shaping temporal autonomy. Fostering flexibility, particularly in familialist policies, together with challenging traditional gender norms, can pave the way for a more equitable distribution of temporal autonomy, ultimately enhancing the well-being of parents in times of crisis.

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ORCID iDs

Libora Oates-Indruchová  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1384-0450>

Lenka Formánková  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4617-2751>

Notes

1. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/time-use-surveys>
2. Other research suggests that writing and publishing tended to be gendered during COVID-19 restrictions, with women producing less, while spending more time on academic ‘tutoring and pastoral care duties’ (França et al., 2023).
3. Fodor et al. (2020) concluded on a representative sample in Hungary that, although the percentage increase of time spent on family work was more or less the same for men as for women, it still meant a greater number of hours for women due to a pre-existing gender inequality.

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