

Pandemic Pedagogy and Parenthood:

How COVID-19 Affected Professorship and Parenting

Halley Zhang

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Shannon Malone Gonzalez



INTRODUCTION

This study explores the impact of the **COVID-19 pandemic lockdown** on the **professorship and parenting experiences of higher education employees** and the **meanings they made** out of these times. It especially focuses on how their **professor-parent work-life balances** were impacted. Thematic analysis on interviews revealed the lived experiences of higher education parent-employees, uncovering both the **negative and positive impacts**.

METHODS

This was a **qualitative, interview-based study** that relied on **thematic analysis on in-depth interviews**. These methods were conducted among a sample of **tenure-track and teaching-track professors at UNC-Chapel Hill**.

Pre-Interview Survey

- Recruitment through email listservs
- Asked basic questions about work and home life

In-depth Interviews

- 45-75 minute in-depth interviews on professorship and parenting pre-, during, and post-COVID

Thematic Analysis

- Thematic coding using a bottom-up, inductive approach to find common patterns

Who Was Eligible?

- Employees at UNC-Chapel Hill who:
 - Have been the primary instructor for at least 1 three-credit hour course before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic WHILE
 - Having parented at least one child under the age of 18 during those times

Who Participated?

- 4 tenured professors, 4 teaching professors, one pre-tenure professor
- 5 women, 4 men
- 1-3 children spanning ages 3-17
- Multiple disciplines of study
- All in "nuclear," dual-income households

PRE-PANDEMIC

- **Shuttling** (commuting kids to and from daycare, school, and extracurricular activities) and **supervision** were identified as the two biggest challenges.
- Participants developed unique household schedules and **systems of distributing work**.
- **Certain teaching blocks** (mid-day, Tuesday/Thursday) were **highly sought after** for professor-parents. Departments often gave **tenured professors priority** access to these blocks.
- Researching professors had the additional responsibility of **balancing teaching, parenting, and researching**.
- Professor-parenting wasn't easy, but through carefully-curated schedules and systems, it was **predictable**. Childcare access during weekdays was almost always guaranteed.
- Because work-from-home was not normalized, a clear work/parenting balance was **clearly spatially separated from the office and the home**.

"My department, because I'm non-tenure track, they prevent non-tenure track from teaching on Tuesday/Thursdays because that's like the more ideal time. So that's reserved for tenured faculty. It's very hierarchical, right?"

DURING THE PANDEMIC

- Participants experienced an **entire loss of work-life balance**. This was due to two major impacts of the pandemic lockdown:
 1. There was a newfound need for **constant supervision of children**, therefore also resulting in **constant interruptions to work**.
 2. Many homes had "open floor plans" that **lacked the physical infrastructure** to accommodate multiple people working from home.
- Because research work required prolonged attentiveness, many **tenured or tenure-track professors experienced delays to research progress**.
- Participants were thankful for being able to spend more time with their kids during the pandemic, which provided **fond memories** and **opportunities for family bonding**.

"I can look back at the early days of the pandemic as having a bit of charm to them... Parents had nothing to do but play with their kids, people had nothing to do but go for walks."

POST-PANDEMIC

- Professors had to adjust to **changes in the undergraduate mindset**, such as continuing to expect aspects of online classrooms and gaps in content comprehension of curricula taught during the pandemic.
- Researching professors **struggled to regain research progress** even after returning to in-person work.
- Schools and daycares now had a **lowered threshold for a "sick day."** Children were sent home from school more often, which **increases the burden supervising** care for parents and **unexpected time away from work**.
- **New technologies** that were introduced to the higher-ed classroom during the lockdown were now being **introduced as supplements to the post-pandemic classroom**, which provided **additional professor-parenting balance support**.

"I still have recorded lectures. If I had to miss a day for illness, or my kid was home sick, I would just say, 'Okay, for Tuesday, we're gonna have an asynchronous lecture. Here it is.' And so, that now existed in a way that was very useful for me."

PERSPECTIVE CHANGES

This project uncovered two major perspective changes that participants adopted as a result of their pandemic experience.

1 Newfound Acceptance of Work-From-Home

Reduction of pressure to remain in office and stigmatization around being physically absent from work.

2 Newfound Importance of Spending Time With Children and Family

Realizing that the fond memories and opportunities for family bonding did not have to end with the pandemic, and making an effort to prioritize this in the future.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic **heavily impacted** professorship-parenting experiences. From before, during, and after the pandemic, each time period came with its **unique challenges**, but also had its own **positive aspects**. Professor-parents are **continuing to fight the challenges created by the lockdown**, but they are also **building a post-pandemic work-life experience** that is informed by the challenges and benefits of the past, forging an **improved new normal**.



SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE POLICY

- Departments should practice **equitability and compassion for all instructors**, regardless of tenured or non-tenured status.
- **Hold discussions** to improve and re-invent pedagogy and research, even without an ongoing crisis.
- Be more **parent-inclusive** in adoption of future policies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to **Dr. Shannon Malone Gonzalez** for her excellent mentorship and to **Dr. Kate Weisshaar** for her insight as a second reader. Thank you to **Dr. Scott Duxbury** for his prolonged support and involvement in my thesis defense. Thank you to my **educators, family, and friends** for their encouragement. Thank you to **Honors Carolina** and the **Department of Sociology** for providing me with this opportunity, and to **Dr. Neal Caren, René Iwo, and my peers in my thesis cohort** for their guidance.