



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

“If it’s gonna get done, I have to do it
myself”

- *A qualitative study about Covid-19, household labor and
equality*

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Abstract

This paper investigates in what way the still ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has affected the gendered division of household labor. Historically speaking, in most countries and cultures, (and in cohabiting relationships), women have taken on the main responsibility for the household labor. The pandemic has affected a lot of workplaces, many employees have gone from working in offices towards working remotely from home. With the rise in time spent at home, one can wonder how that has affected the level of equality within the division of household labor. This qualitative research consists of data gathered from 11 interviews with individuals in cohabiting relationships. The analysis shows that the individuals within these cohabiting, childless relationships appear to have been somewhat unaffected by the pandemic, in regard to their division of household labor. In some cases, the level seemed to have gone down, resulting in an even more unequal division of household labor.

Key words: Covid-19, household labor, equality, gender, work, division

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Introduction

The ongoing pandemic of the Covid-19 virus has hit us all in a lot of different ways. Social distancing as a way to curb the spread of the pandemic, has for many meant more distance work from home, more time spent at home and life generally becoming turned upside-down. These changes have brought on a lot of different, new struggles that most people are dealing with, including struggles in the strive for gender equality manifested through the division of household labor. Household work is something that is still relevant, something that always needs to be done, pandemic or not. One of the biggest changes that the pandemic has brought on is perhaps that of distance work that has affected a big number of people. Working from home could potentially affect the relationship between paid work and unpaid work. When is one truly 'off' when all of one's time is spent at home in a confined space? Where is the line between the two? The equal division of unpaid household labor has often been seen as something vital for women, in order to ensure that they have the same possibilities as men to be able to access both the paid workforce and political influence. The issue of the division of household labor has since the 1970s been a matter of public policy and achieving equality between men and women regarding the unpaid household and care work has been a national goal for gender equality since the 1990s (Rönblom & Hudson, 2012:139). Even though Sweden has implemented these policies for almost 50 years, one can wonder if they have made a difference. Is Sweden an equal society when it comes to the gendered division of household labor? How has the implementation of remote work and social distancing in the home due to the pandemic affected the division of household labor in Sweden?

The strive for equality is not something new, yet it seems to be an everlasting uphill battle. If, and then how, the pandemic has affected this battle is of scientific interest and needs to be further researched. As such, this study of how measures implemented to curb the spread of the Covid-19, such as remote working from home and social distancing in the homes, have impacted the division of household labor in relation to gender equality is of great interest and importance.

Background

How we view gender and how gender affects the division of household labor have been inert processes, where it appears that not a lot has changed in the recent decades. The traditional ideas about gender, the binary, traditional division of men and women, stem far back in time

and tend to be recreated within the gender scheme, which continuously affect our society (Hirdman, 2001; Jordansson & Lane, 2017). What does one imply when discussing the topic of 'work'? Birgitta Jordansson and Linda Lane (2017) argue that the concept of work itself is based in the industrialisation process (towards a paid labor market) and is a gendered concept, since it is rooted in a society where the men are the ones who conduct the paid labor and the women are the ones who conduct the unpaid household labor and care work. The creation of the 'housewife' can be linked back to industrialization and the separation of paid and unpaid labor (Shelton & John, 1996:303). The concept of 'work' still lives on, after patterns that are more or less taken for granted, and that keep on affecting the individual's view of the concept of 'work'. This can also be in regard to the Equality Policies in Sweden, that mostly regards women's right to the labor market when discussing the issue of gender equality.

One example that studies couples without children is a study by Carin Holmberg. Carin Holmberg (1993) writes in her publication "It is called love" (Det kallas kärlek) about how the female subordination and the male overorder is recreated and upheld in heterosexual relationships in couples without children in Sweden. In her publication she writes that it is not having children that perpetuates asymmetry of power in a relationship, but it could be what brings these differences in power up to light (1993:18). Holmberg writes further that the Swedish (or Nordic) model also includes equality, and even though the Nordic countries are further along the journey towards equality than many others, we still live in a male society. Issues here include that in a lot of occurrences, women are held responsible if there is no equality in the labor market, and when the responsibility comes down to an individual level for equality, women will be seen as responsible for the unequal results (1993:21-22). Holmberg's study shows that it is feasible to expose hidden social mechanisms that endorse the asymmetry of power in couple relationships, and the study also shows that it is vital to continue to trace the subtle patterns of interaction, from which societies' gender power structures are created and recreated (1993:209).

With regards to the fourth goal from the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2020) Statistics Sweden (SCB) provides statistical evidence that shows that there have been changes in the division of the unpaid household labor over time. Women's time spent doing paid work has risen and their time spent on unpaid housework has gone down. For men the numbers are reversed, but only slightly, since their time spent doing

unpaid housework seems to have only changed marginally (Statistics Sweden, 2019). Ever since the implementation of gender equality policies in the 1970s, these policies have tried to challenge the notion of the male breadwinner, but instead trying to encourage women into the paid workforce. Charlott Nyman, Lasse Reinikainen and Kristina Eriksson (2018) argues that Sweden has consciously been working towards a more equal society since the 1970s with policies catering towards this issue by hanging focuses on labor market laws, parental leave for both parents, workplace policies, the Swedish school curriculum, etcetera. Sweden also uses the concept of gender neutrality in their policies to promote gender equality (2018:37).

The patterns described in Holmberg's (1993) study can be seen even during more recent years. Within the example of Swedish couples, Lars Evertsson and Charlotte Nyman (2009) discuss the way couples organize their everyday lives in Sweden. They found that negotiations were not as big a part of their lives as other research had shown, but instead that rituals and routines guided the couples in how they organized their everyday lives. They write that gender is 'done' and that it is closely connected to how couples organize their daily lives. Men and women are being seen as 'being' a certain way, 'naturally good' at certain things. It can be hard to see these gendered characters in everyday life, because we tend to take this everyday life for granted (2009:39). Further on the authors write that the couples they interviewed for their publication all showed patterns of rituals and routines in their daily lives, which were to a very high degree gendered, even though the couples in questions did not see the division of responsibility and labor as connected to gender (2009:43). Yvonne Hirdman (2001) writes that the production of gender is something that is always moving, something flowing. What the patterns do is that they uncover the variability, the always ongoing (2001:96-97). The gendered patterns we see within relationships can be seen as something that is very sluggish and slow moving, since not much has changed, or only changed a bit, for a long time.

Sweden and equality

Sweden has a relatively long history of gender equality policies. Since the 1970s there have been implemented policies that are meant to create a more gender equal society (Reinikainen, 2020). It is here that we differentiate from a lot of other countries, which do not have the same history of a pursuit towards gender equality. The level of equality has been seen as particularly higher in larger cities and within higher educated spheres. Malin Rönnblom

(2002:34) claims that even though the gender power order might look different in the city compared to in the countryside, the level of oppression might not correspond to that.

A report from SOU (2014) showed that even though women in Sweden have started to engage in paid work more and the “two-provider-families” have been established, they still conduct most of the unpaid household labor. The Swedish Gender Equality Agency has as one of their sub goals, goal number 4, “*Gender equal distribution of unpaid housework and provision of care. Women and men must have the same responsibility for housework and have the opportunity to give and receive care on equal terms.*” (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2018). The agency writes that “...However, the coronavirus pandemic could also lead to a more equal society, as millions of fathers the world over are now staying home. It is too early to say for certain at this stage, says Karin Röbbäck de Souza, senior analyst at the Swedish Gender Equality Agency.” (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2020). Reinikainen (2020) writes that Sweden, being spoken about as one of the most equal countries in the world, (2020:113) and where there has been an official equality policy since the 1970s, still is not fully equal when it comes down to it. Both statistics and research show that there still is an unequal division of household labor in Sweden. This is still true, even in areas/couples where people consciously strive towards an equal division. One explanation to this could be that the idea of the Swedish equality is to a certain extent an ideal, rather than a practice (2020:114).

The Swedish Gender Equality Agency has written that, regarding the fourth gender equality policy goal¹, and now with the ongoing pandemic, it is unclear if it will impact the division of unpaid household labor to become more equal or not (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2020). The European Institute for Gender Equality writes that before the pandemic began, women in the EU spent on average 13 hours more per week than men on unpaid household labor. They also write that with the closings of workplaces and schools, etcetera it is likely that the workload will increase for women, but on the other hand now the men spend more time at home than ever, and this could be an opportunity for fathers to spend more time engaging with their children (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021).

¹ “*Gender equal distribution of unpaid housework and provision of care. Women and men must have the same responsibility for housework and have the opportunity to give and receive care on equal terms.*” - Sub goal four

SVT Nyheter (SVT, 2021) writes that equality has regressed in several different areas during the pandemic, with unpaid household work being one of those areas. The news article also states that even though more men than women have died due to the virus, women are the ones who have been hit harder in a lot of other measurable areas. One of the largest work life panels in Sweden, Manpower Work Life (Via.TT, 2021) writes that 28% of Swedish people living together with a partner have experienced changes in the division of household labor since the start of the pandemic. The differences between the genders are significant, where all 18% of the men seeing a more equal division of household labor, whereas women only have a 13% agreement of said statement. Regarding those who have experienced a more unequal division of labor, the difference is less significant, as 12% of men and 14% of women agree with that statement.

The concept of equality with regard to household work in the form of paid labor has generally been seen as rather self-explanatory, in that both genders have the same responsibilities. When it comes to unpaid household labor, on the other hand, opinions vary. Birgitta Jordansson and Linda Lane (2018) writes that in Sweden there has been a displacement of the that leads to individualised solutions to the conflict between paid labor and the responsibilities for the household. With the government sanctioned RUT- services² one can essentially buy oneself out of this division of paid/unpaid labor issues. But then it instead becomes a class issue, since not everyone will have the monetary assets to be able to use these services, and furthermore the individuals who provide these services tend to be those of lower levels of education and women with immigrant backgrounds. A new work market has opened, but it is on the terms of the people with the most resources.

Other relevant context

The view on marriage, presented below, is a very common one, not at all unusual in the Global North, and therefore examples from outside Sweden will be brought in to give a wider understanding of the issues at large. This research is therefore not completely comparable to Swedish studies, but it gives a wider understanding of the subject and is therefore important to add. Research by Harriet B. Presser, about couples in the US, shows that in dual earner marriages the women are still the ones doing most of the household chores, by almost double the number of hours compared to the men. This is then on top of their paid work in the labor

² RUT- services (RUT-tjänster) is taxation relief for services done in your home, such as cleaning, maintenance etcetera.

market (1994:353). Her research also shows that if there is a decline in the wife's participation in household labor, without the men increasing their time spent doing the same tasks, it meant that services were purchased instead, e.g., eating out more, acquiring domestic help or simply just reducing the accepted standard of the household's upkeep.

Statistical change over time has occurred, with regards to the gendered division of housework. Bianchi et al. (2012) writes that women's (i.e., American women) time spent doing housework has declined in the timespan of 1965-2010, whereas men's time spent on doing these types of work has more than doubled between 1965 and 1998/99, where it reached the highest number of hours worked with 11 hours per week, before it dropped to 10 hours per week in 2009/2010. In 2009/2010, women were estimated to do 1.6 times as much housework as their male counterparts (Bianchi et.al, 2012:56). Lam et.al (2012) also finds, in their study of the division of household labor, that the housework done by wives has dropped in recent years. Their study lasted over seven years and their result from this study can be interpreted in two different ways. First, that as children get older, they can help more as well, which might affect the decline of the need for mothers' labor. Secondly, there is some evidence that suggests that over time adults become more abetting towards gender egalitarianism, and that the husband's participation in everyday labor could increase during the marriage (2012:950-51). These studies do include couples with children, but the patterns that they demonstrate are still relevant for this study.

Beth Anne Shelton and Daphne John (1996) notes that whether a woman is employed or not, she will still have the most amount of household labor, even if women are doing less and men more than in the past (1996:300). The historical aspect of household work and how it has developed can be traced back decades. With the rise of new technological inventions of what is often called 'labor saving devices' (ibid:302), time spent on household labor could be shortened, and this all happened in the time frame where women started entering the paid workforce. Although it has not been proven that the inventions of these new household appliances permitted women to enter the paid labor force, they were well-matched with their participation in the labor force. Even though this research is a bit dated, it is still relevant since we still have a separation of paid and unpaid labor.

Purpose, aim and research question

The aim and perspective of this study is to put into light if the ongoing pandemic has influenced the division of household labor within heterosexual³ relationships without children, where at least one of the partners have had their main occupation affected by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, meaning that they were working remotely for some time during the pandemic. The slow-moving patterns regarding the ideas of gender, lay the foundation for the question of how one was being raised and experiences from childhood affect one's everyday life and this is one thing that will be studied. Do the previous ideas about gender and its relationship to the division of household labor still exist among these young people who are being interviewed? The purpose of this study is to nuance this issue, if the ongoing pandemic affected the division of household labor in heterosexual couples before they have children, and if so, how.

The research questions presented here below stems from the themes that emerged after analyzing the interviews.

Research questions:

- How does the respondents view gender and how has their upbringing influenced their view on gender?
 - How does this affect their view on household labor?
- What is equality for them?

Previous research

Previous research in this specific field is sparse due to the fact that the pandemic is still ongoing, which confirms the scientific importance of this study. However, there is a lot of previous studies done on the gendered division of household work. A lot of this research comes from other countries than Sweden, which is important to have in mind while reading, since Sweden is similar, but not the same, as many other countries in the Global North. This is also true in relation to how the different countries in the Global North chose different strategies in order to curb the spread of Covid-19. Some of these studies, of previous research, has also been presented in the background. The studies presented are added to provide a wider understanding of said issues and to bring up the themes that will later be

³ For this study 'heterosexual relationships will mean that the couples are in a different gendered relationship, the individual's sexual orientation has not been established since it was not deemed relevant for this particular study.

discussed in the analysis. A lot of the research presented below does include couples with children. The choice of including them was made due to the issue that not a lot of research has been made of couples without children, and that they still provide important data to said issues and they are therefore deemed relevant.

Gender, equality, and household labor

Debates regarding the gendered welfare state regime have involved a model of gender relations that can be seen as something that involved more than one element. One key focus here is that of the duality of relationship between family-welfare-state to produce a distinct variety of male breadwinner regimes. The importance of welfare that included care provision was seen as having extra importance, since this it would enable women's employment. Even if this regards care work, it solidifies a work division between the genders that affects everybody. A gender regime is established in all the institutional spheres, which includes economy, violence, polity, and civil society. A gender regime is best considered as a multilevel macro level model, and different countries could have different gender regimes (Walby, 2009:257, 260).

Hook (2010) writes that, according to their research, it was revealed that women do more, and men do less, time-flexible housework in nations where parental leave is less prevalent and work hours are long. In countries where there are more public childcare options and men are entitled to take parental leave, women did less of this work. It was shown that national context mattered for the character of gender inequality in the home through national – individual-level pathways. This study does include couples with children, but the patterns that they show, that the countries level of equality matters, are applicable to discuss and bring into this study. One study of Dutch couples (Weismann et.al, 2008) found that even couples who desire to divide the work equally still regularly ended up dividing the housework according to traditional patterns.

A study by Reichelt et.al (2020) shows that during the pandemic, couples who both were employed at the start of the pandemic showed different gender-role attitudes if one of them became unemployed. Men expressed a more egalitarian attitude if they became unemployed versus women, who instead expressed a more traditional attitude. This was demonstrated through adapting gender-role attitudes to the lived reality. This article further states that their findings coincide with the theoretical prognosis that when men lose their jobs, with

inclinations that the traditional gender expectations demand that men work full time and only provide limited aid in the household labor, they are instead pushed into a more non-traditional agreement. This agreement seems to nudge their attitudes toward a more egalitarian route in cases where men lose their jobs. In opposition to this, when women lose their jobs, they are losing the role that could be seen as non-traditional or egalitarian. This instead would then nudge their attitudes regarding gender-roles towards a more traditional view (2020:241-42).

In more recent studies it is shown that these issues and questions of the gendered division of household labor are still being, and are needed to be, investigated. This study does include couples with children, but it still brings up relevant patterns. Carlson, Miller and Sassler (2018) write that the division of housework tasks has changed and that contemporary couples share, more often than before, all routine tasks. The article also states that research points towards a change in division of the household labor, towards a more equitable one, in low to medium income families with young children. This leads to a more positive couple-level result. It has also been found that young adults increasingly desire for a partner that will share both the domestic and financial responsibilities equally (Carlson et. al 2018:1,2). Further on, Carlson et.al writes that couples with an egalitarian arrangement are more inclined to have higher quality relationships. This is because they cultivate communication and cooperation amid partners, which are two fundamental and increasingly essential predicates to a good relationship and a good sex life (2018:5).

Equality and policies

Stanford (2018) writes that even though Sweden is one of the most equal countries in the world, there still are parts of the Swedish society that are not equal, and one of those parts is the usage of time. Women perform more unpaid work than men, who on the other hand, take responsibility for more paid work (2018:7). Stanford writes further that there are not only quantitative differences, but also qualitative differences, when it comes to the differences between men's and women's household labor. Women execute more of the routine and recurring duties which are spread over the day's whole 24 hours (2018:14). Over recent decades, women have become more highly educated and they have created a stronger connection to the labor market and careers, which have changed their comparative benefits in labor work and have also affected their usage of time. To be able to get even more change, men's comparative benefits in household labor will need to change also. (2018:17).

Covid-19 and its effect on equality

The Swedish research within the field of Covid-19 and its effect on gender equality is so far narrow and limited, due to the recency of this topic, with the pandemic still being ongoing. There is however research from other countries affected by the pandemic, and they will be presented in this chapter.

When the whole world goes through something as deep of a crisis as the Covid-19 pandemic, it is bound to put some strain on society and elevate issues that already exist. Crisis, like the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, defines and shapes long-standing problems and makes them more obvious (Chwioroth & Walter, 2019).

According to recent research regarding how the pandemic has affected the division⁴ of household labor, Novus on request by Futurion found that in Sweden with regards to distance work and the division of responsibility, that four out of ten individuals put in more time into household labor than before and for just over half of the individuals asked nothing has changed. From those who thought that they spent more time on household labor, it was mostly men who thought this (Arbetsvärlden, 2021). This does not seem to be a worldwide phenomenon though, according to the same article (Arbetsvärlden, 2021), a report from UN Women instead showed evidence that even if both genders have seen that their unpaid workload has gone up, women carry more of this workload than the men. It seems that the Covid-19 pandemic is strengthening cultural and social gender norms in a lot of different parts of the world.

Regarding the ongoing pandemic with the Covid-19 virus in Sweden and how it has affected, there have been some recent studies with this topic as a focus. A report from TCO from 2021 (Forsell, 2021) about corona and how the pandemic has affected people's puzzle of everyday life. One thing that was reported was that officials with children under 12, women who primarily worked from home were now less stressed about dealing with the puzzle of everyday life, when compared to women who did not work from home. Men who work from home were affected in the opposite way from women and were instead more stressed about

⁴ One recent bachelor thesis (Holst & Sparrborn, 2020) found that there is a correlation between higher education and a more gendered equal division of household labor. This was even the case if the education level was different between the two partners or if they both held the same level of education. Another bachelor thesis on the topic of the equal division of household work, but in same gendered female relationships, shows that these women experience that their relationships have an equal division of household labor (Hermansson & Pennholm, 2020).

the puzzle of everyday life compared to men who worked on site (Forsell, 2021:3). Yet again this study included couples with children, but it does bring up relevant aspects.

Research from other countries

Here follows a few examples of previous research from other countries, but who are dealing with similar issues as those discussed from the Swedish perspective. These are added to bring an even fuller foundation to the understanding of the issues that we face regarding the matters of Covid-19, equality and household labor.

Regarding the pandemic and equality, research from Israel done during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic shows that the pandemic has not levelled the inequality curve, but instead heightened it. Women have lost jobs to a higher degree than men and the economic decline that has followed the pandemic outbreak has affected women's attachment to the labor market more negatively than men. Younger women appeared to have been most affected by this negative economic effect (Kristal & Yaish, 2020:). What makes this regression, due to the pandemic, different from other economic regressions is that it has other implications for gender equality. This regression we are now facing will, in contrary to 'normal' regressions, affect women's employment more than men's employment. The reason given is that since the employment drop about social distancing has a bigger impact on working sectors that typically employ more women than men. This together with the closing of school and childcare facilities has a large effect on working mothers (Alon et.al, 2020). This is yet another theme, of the economic effects, that has affected equality with regards to the pandemic.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, several countries went into lockdown. Spain was one of the countries who were hit the hardest by the virus and went into lockdown fast with closed schools. Work was done remotely and strict stay at home orders were enforced. Farré et.al (2020) found that the lockdown Spain faced increased the quantity of housework and childcare, and that men did increase their participation in these labors, but only slightly since most of the work still fell on women, as it did before the lockdown. It appears that gender inequalities have been elevated in both the unpaid and paid work due to the Covid-19 pandemic, at least in the short-term. Another thing to note is that childcare/care work has been greatly affected by the pandemic and a lot of research includes this.

Almudena Sevilla and Sarah Smith (2020) found that in the UK, during the Covid-19 pandemic, with regard to the higher demand for childcare due to schools closing, etcetera, the families have been doing approximately a work week of childcare, with mothers take on most of it. In households where the men have not been engaged in paid employment, there have been steps towards a more equal allocation, which could hopefully lead to a more shared division of the burden of childcare in the future. Their research also showed that apart from this exception for unemployed men, women take on most of the labor of childcare, independent of their work status. Considering the bigger workload for women, there have been preliminary showings that women have experienced a bigger decline in mental health than men during the Covid-19 crisis (Adams-Prassl et.al, 2020). Zamberlan et al (2021) also writes about how the division of unpaid housework in the UK has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Their results show that there are vital differences between childcare and housework. where childcare seems to be shared way more equally between partners than housework. This more 'gender-egalitarian' division of childcare is not something that is new, as previous studies have repeatedly implied that childcare presents a more pleasant activity than housework.

With the pandemic, still ongoing, and the need for social distance as a tool to combat the spread of the virus, working from home has been the new normal for a lot of people. One must recognize, however, that working from home is not something that everyone has the possibility to even do. Vasil I. Yassenov (2020) writes that, in the US, people working in lower-wage jobs are up to three times less likely to be able to work from home compared to people with high-wage jobs. The article further states that individuals with lower levels of education, ethnic minorities, younger adults, and immigrants tend to be more concentrated in professions that are less prone to be able to be performed from home. One thing that has to be brought up is that to have the possibility to work from home is not something that everyone is granted. It becomes an issue of class and education, since those jobs who have the possibility of working from home tend to belong to people in middle- or upper-class environments.

During this ongoing pandemic, several countries went into lockdown to fight the spread of the virus. The lockdowns that occurred impacted the way that people live their everyday lives and how they spend their time. Lyn Craig (2020) writes that in the instance of Australia, where they enforced hard lockdowns early, it was evident that the need for care work and unpaid work is essential for the country's economy. Craig writes that one positive side of the

Covid-19 crisis appeared to be that it could induce some change in some of the structures that are reinforcing unequal gender relations. This could hopefully lead to the government recognising the economic contribution women make, how to best support them and recognising the family constraints this causes, as well as hoping for a more gender-equal participation in unpaid care and domestic work at home (2020:687). The research conducted by Craig found that the time spent on unpaid labor during the lockdown rose tremendously with varying degrees of dissatisfaction from men and women. Some reported that now the division of labor was more equal than before versus other who reported that “... *the feminist cause has been set back 10 years by this pandemic...*” (2020:687-88).

The report from UN Women (UN Women, 2020) writes that the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has widened gender and economic inequalities. The report further states that, apart from reduced incomes and lost jobs, the pandemic has also increased ‘time poverty’ for many women. Before the pandemic occurred, women did almost three times as much domestic work and unpaid labor as men, globally speaking. With everything shutting down, including schools, day-care facilities etcetera, everybody, but especially women, began making drastic changes in how one spends one's time (UN Women, 2020). According to a report from World Economic Forum (Bülow, 2021, 21 February), has the pandemic caused the prognosis of when women and men will reach equality to be pushed backward by several decades. Before the pandemic, the prognosis was that it would take 99.5 years for women and men to reach gender equality, whereas now the prognosis is that it will take 135.6 years.

Regarding how parenthood could change the gendered division of labor, Martin Dribe and Maria Stanfors (2009) writes that there has been a change over time with this issue. In 1990/91 parenthood strengthened the traditional gender division of household labor and then ten years later, 2000-01, this issue was much less the case, when parenthood instead affected women and men in a more similar way (Dribe & Stanfors, 2009). This is interesting to note, that couples who had a certain level of equality before having children would be affected with a decreased level of equality. But that over time this appears to have changed to become more comparable between the genders.

With regard to the division of paid work and unpaid work and the division between them, Nancy Folbre (2014) writes that since the world we live in is both patriarchal and capitalist, the value put on care work is insignificant (2014:2). Historically speaking, care services have been administered by women within families, these women whose choices have been

confined by patriarchal constraints (2014:11). Furthermore, there has been research in the field of the gendered division of household labor, but since the Covid-19 crisis is very new, and still ongoing, there is not much Swedish research within this very specific niche of scientific research and therefore this project would have the possibility provide some nuance and nuance to this issue.

Theoretical concepts and perspectives

In this chapter, relevant concepts and perspectives will be presented. The concepts presented will be used to discuss the slow-moving patterns that have been seen within these matters. These concepts will then furthermore be used in the analysis of the collected data that this study has provided. The concepts presented will be used as tools in the analysis to help explain the patterns and notions that will be brought up during this research.

Theoretical concepts: Doing gender

As discussed in the background, gender is traditionally seen as something binary, men and women, and their respective work has traditionally been divided from without their respective gender. Gender is not something that is absolute, but instead it is something that only exists as a social relationship. This relationship reproduces itself; it does not matter if the individuals involved are aware of this or not. Therefore, it has the key characteristics of a system – a gender regime (Walby, 2009:254). The aspect of gender (‘genus’) is discussed in depth by Yvonne Hirdman (2001), where she argues that gender is something that one is raised into, either into the role of Man or of Woman, and where in most spheres the norm is the Man (2001:46,60). Hirdman writes that we have a “Swedish dilemma”, which Hirdman compares to “the American dilemma”, where it is argued that the racism towards black people fundamentally goes against the principles of the American society. Similarly, in Sweden inequality goes against what we in our social-democratic society strives towards; everyone's equal value, everyone's equal worth and that we all are equal. Including women (2001:155-57).

‘Doing gender’, seeing gender as something that is being done consequently is a known phrase within social research. Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987) aims to describe gender as “a routine, methodological, and recurring accomplishment” (1987:125). They write that ‘doing gender’ concerns a multiplex of socially guided interactional, perceptual and also

micropolitical actions that provides specific views of what it means to be of feminine or masculine 'natures'. By 'doing gender' West and Zimmerman write that it meant that one creates differences between men and women, girls and boys, that are not essential, natural or biological. Once these differences have been composed, they are later used to fortify the importance of gender (1987:137). Nyman, Reinikainen and Eriksson (2018) writes that they notice that 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987) is intertwined with the gendered practices, this complicated connection between the practices identified together with the process of 'doing gender', is an important aspect of the legitimization and reproduction of the unequal division of housework and simultaneously it conclusively reproduces a gender order that is unequal (2018:44). They write further that the self-understanding Swedes have of themselves as gender equal might actually inhibit gender equality, since men and women see themselves as gender equal, disregarding how they actually organize their everyday lives (2018:44).

West and Zimmerman (1987) were the ones who originated the phrase 'doing gender', and it has then since been used exceedingly within the field of gender research. Elisabeth K. Kelan (2010) writes that it is both theoretically and empirically hard to imagine what a society in which gender was not important would look like (Kelan, 2010:189). Her article also investigates how gender could be undone within both post structural and ethnomethodological and discursive traditions. She writes that these two perspectives point towards different answers. From the ethnomethodological perspective undoing gender would entail that the discrepancy between gender and sex category is exploited to confuse the association between belonging to the male sex category and executing femininity or belonging to the female sex category and executing masculinity. This would empirically mean that for example, exploring interaction that involved women or men in non-traditional situations or occupations where the infinite relevance of gender is defined, and gender becomes less and less relevant (2010:190). This is also what Hirdman (2001) writes when she discusses the gender system and how it is built. Perhaps the separation and break from the male norm would mean that gender would become less important.

Another author, Francine M. Deutsch (2007), who discusses the same theory of 'doing gender', argues that the phrase itself can be interpreted that gender oppression is inevitable. Deutsch wants to shift the focus towards how to 'undo gender' instead. She writes that since the language we use shapes what our minds are drawn to, it is vital to use it in a way that is

beneficial. She suggests that we should only use the phrase ‘doing gender’ when talking about the social interactions that reinforce gender differences, and instead use the phrase ‘undoing gender’ when talking about the social interactions that can reduce gender differences (2007:122). Carlson et. al (2018:5) also writes that housework is essential when “doing gender” and it could be a way for women and men to establish traditional femininity and masculinity. This could be seen as another example of the slow-moving patterns that have previously been discussed.

Theoretical concepts: “The second shift”

The question of the gendered division regarding household labor is not a new one but has been asked numerous times before. Arlie Hochschild (1989) discusses in her publication “The Second Shift” the so-called “*double day*” of working women, meaning that they have to in a way work both at their paid job and then continue working with the unpaid work of household labor. She writes that in the interviews conducted for this book, the women seemed to be more severely torn between their demands of work and family than their male counterparts (Hochschild & Machung, 1989;3, 6). Hochschild also writes that this second shift also must be talked about with regard to class and class difference, because who is it who does the babysitting for the working women who can afford childcare? It is usually other women with a lesser economic standing (1989:246-7). This means that only people from a certain socioeconomic background can afford buying these household services and it would just reinforce class differences.

With regards to the division between unpaid and paid work, research shows that women take on the most responsibility for the planning and organization of the unpaid work- household labor. This is called the third shift, with the first shift being paid labor, the second shift being unpaid household labor and lastly the third shift then being the planning and mental organisation of everything that needs to work within the household. The third shift is an extension of Hochschild’s term of ‘the second shift’ (1989). Several scholars have written about the third shift, but for this research’s purpose Arnell-Szurkos’ (2020) account of it will be used. The same author also writes that the stress hormone cortisol rises in women when they leave the first shift and start the second, and the opposite happens in men. This implies that women are more stressed over household labor than men appear to be (Arnell-Szurkos,

2020). This could be seen as an extension of the third shift, worrying about household labor as one aspect of mental labor.

Arlie Hochschild writes that the happiest marriages with both spouses working were ones in which they did not automatically dump the load of the former housewife, e.g., the household labor, onto the women but did instead share the role between the two of them. This division did not appear to be very common, but as the society and government continue to shape a new gender strategy, the hope is that many more men and women can enjoy the life of what happens when family life is just that, family life and not a second shift (1989:270).

Method and collected material

The method used in this thesis for data collection will be that of semi-structured interviews. For this specific topic, interviews were deemed to be the best choice to gather data and therefore making this a qualitative study. Even though a quantitative study, by using a questionnaire as a method of data collection, could potentially reach a larger sample size and would be beneficial for the accuracy of the study, it was deemed that a qualitative interview study could go more into depth and be more thorough than a quantitative study could be within this specific topic. Due to the topic being of some sensitivity, interviews will allow for the participants to be more open and elaborate than they could be in a questionnaire. This research aims to investigate how the participants view these topics of the gendered division of household labor. The use of qualitative interviews as a method of data collection strives to search for qualitative knowledge as an expression of normal prose, as opposed to aiming to provide quantification (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014:47).

Qualitative interviews

Interviews were the chosen tool, since it makes the most sense with the research question being one of “how”. According to Kvale and Brinkmann, when the topics that are being investigated are those of human experience or of conversational reality, the tool of interviewing is preferred (2014:142-43).

It is important to be able to create a comfortable environment when conducting qualitative interviews, an environment where the respondent feels comfortable and free to share private occurrences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014:33). Due to the pandemic and the spread of the

Covid-19 virus, the interviews were conducted online for safety of both the participants and the researcher, plus to adhere to the general restrictions in place. It is harder to fully connect with the respondent when not conducting the interview live, but it was a necessary thing to do given the current circumstances. The two main categories of interviews are structured interviews and qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews dominate within qualitative research. The three biggest differences between the two are: first, there is no strict manuscript for the relationships between researcher and participant. The second difference is that the researcher will not attempt to embrace a coherent behaviour or demeanour in all interviews. Thirdly, the most important questions in a qualitative interview are open and not closed (Yin, 2013:136-38). The interviews were initially held in a semi structured way, to be able to keep the order of the questions flexible and be able to put extra focus on those topics and themes that the interviewee wanted to discuss further. When using semi structured interviews as a tool for gathering data, it also allows for the researcher to be able to ask follow up questions where the answers are of extra importance (Bryman, 2018:260). The researcher also has freedom to not use the same order of questions in all the interviews, and questions can be added during the interview if the researcher finds that it can be linked to the answers given (ibid:563).

Sampling

In this study, 11 interviews were conducted, with four couples (eight interviews) where both partners participated and three interviews where only one individual in the relationship wanted to participate⁵. This could be due to the semi-sensitive nature of the study, and since this study was conducted online, for safety reasons, one could argue that people working from home might not want to spend more time online. Another reason could potentially be, since this study contains semi-sensitive themes and questions, digging deeper into these themes could potentially bring up some conflicts for the couples, if this is something that they do not agree on. In the appendix a brief clarification of the interviewees will be presented.

The respondents were limited to individuals involved in heterosexual⁶, cohabiting relationships without children, in the age range 25-45, and where at least one of the partner's main occupations had been affected by the pandemic resulting in distance working from

⁵ Interesting to note is that from the couples where one partner participated, it was only the women in said relationships who chose to get interviewed and none of the men.

⁶ See footnote number 2.

home for at least some of the time. These limitations were done to ensure that the couples would have been affected by the pandemic in some sense and would fit the themes being researched. The choice of interviewing couples without children was done due with the notion that couples without children tend to be more equal than couples with children, according to Dribe and Stanford (2009). The choice of only interviewing heterosexual (different gendered) couples was made due to the interest of the gendered aspect of the division of labor, and for that to be able to be investigated properly, heterosexual couples were needed. Another aspect that is important to note is that previous research has mostly focus on care work, childcare, and its implications. This research could be taken further later if one will conduct this research with homosexual, same gendered, couples to investigate their division of labor. The use of individuals who had, at least partially, been able to work from home also raises the question of class, with everything that entails. Not everyone can work from home and for those who can, and who are a part of this study, it means that there will be a natural division of class. The majority of the individuals in this study tended to have a university degree or have been working for a while to be able to be in a position where working remotely was possible. In this research, the parts of intersectionality that were being included were mainly those of gender, class, and age. It could be interesting in future research to deepen this and include, and focus on, individuals from different class backgrounds and perhaps add a focus on same gendered couples.

To acquire the participants needed for this study, the search went in several different directions. Firstly, the researcher posted an ad online, primarily on Facebook and in different Facebook groups, to find suitable participants through the natural network that Facebook provides. This generated a lot of interest, but not enough to gain actual interviewees. This would have entailed the use of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling means finding participants who will give the most relevant results (Yin, 2013:93). From there it turned into more of a convenience sampling. With the restrictions of Covid-19 it was harder to acquire interviewees and therefore it was deemed necessary to find interviewees from the researcher's own social network, which meant that in this instance the researcher reached out to first or secondary personal contacts that did fit into the frame of interest for this study. Convenience sampling means that one chooses the sample because they are easy to acquire. It should not be the primary choice of sampling method, but sometimes it is the only one that works, like in the instance of this study (ibid). Limitations in this study's sampling process is that it could have been beneficial to have acquired more couples and preferable where both

the participants would have chosen to participate. It could also, possibly, have been beneficial to have conducted the interviews with individuals further away from the researchers own network.

All the names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees. The interviewees are 11 individuals in cohabitating heterosexual relationships, four couples and three separate individuals where the partner did not want to participate in the research. The couples are Anna, 28 and Martin, 38, Gustav, 32 and Elin, 36, Karin, 31 and Patric, 39 and lastly Maria, 28 and Anton, 29. The three individuals who participated without their partners are Lisa, 44, Vanessa, 28 and Felicia, 26.

To ensure that the questions being asked at the interviews were understandable and formulated in a way that encouraged the interviewees to talk and discuss the topics at hand, a trial interview was conducted where the subject could intervene and comment on the questions to provide help for the researcher to reevaluate the question's wording if needed. After the trial interview and further rework the questionnaire⁷ used for this study came to be. The interviews were conducted in Swedish or English, depending on which language the interviewee preferred.

The interviews were then conducted digitally to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded to later find patterns and similarities to be further discussed and analysed. The interviews that were conducted for this study lasted between approximately 30 min to 60 min, with the average one lasting around 40 min, and they were made in a semi structured way, allowing the researcher to dig deeper into the questions that she felt needed more elaboration. A semi structured interview is focused on pre-designed topics that the researcher has chosen ahead of the interview (Dalen, 2015:34). The topics that the interviews entailed were household labor versus paid labor, equality and the Covid-19 pandemic's effect on them both.

The interviews were conducted with only one partner of the couple present to ensure that the individual interviewed could be as open and honest as possible. There are both positives and negatives in conducting the interview with both partners present compared to one at a time, but for this research it was deemed better to interview only one partner at time. The age range

⁷ See appendix

was chosen due to the need for my interviewees to be without children, since having children would turn into very different research when one would have to include childcare, etcetera with everything that entails into the question of equal division of labor. It would be a worthwhile topic for future scientific research, but it is not the focal point of this specific research.

The analytic strategy used for analysis for this research will be that of thematic analysis.

Thematic analytical strategy

Thematic analysis is one of the most common ways to analyse qualitative data. When looking for themes in the data, a few things to keep an eye out for are repetition, metaphors and analogies, similarities, and differences, to name a few (Bryman, 2018:702,704). The thematic method works by letting the researcher emanate from their main areas, and under each area the researcher tries to find corresponding quotes from the research that highlights each area, or each theme (Dalen, 2015:110).

Bryman (2018) writes that there are several steps, or governing principles, to partake in to be able to perform a thematic analysis as a foundation for analysis of qualitative data. These steps are 1: Read through at least parts of the collected that that will be analysed, 2: Start coding the material, 3: Develop a lot of the codes to themes, 4: Judge these codes and themes of higher order, 4a: Put names or labels on the themes and their eventual subthemes, 5: Investigate possible connections and correlations between concepts and/or how the concepts varies in regards to the cases characteristics, 6: Note the insights from the previous step to get a narrative of data, and lastly 6a: Make sure that you can defend your themes (Bryman, 2018:707-08). Some themes that were found in this study are those of; the relationship between paid and unpaid work, equality and Covid-19's effect on the gendered division of household labor. These themes laid the foundation for how the research questions were formulated.

Ethics

To ensure that the research made in this study is valid, it is important to adhere to the guidelines recommended by the Scientific Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). Their four main

requirements are those of 1; the information requirement, 2; the consent requirement, 3: the confidentiality requirement and lastly 4: the utilization requirement.

All interviewees have been given a consent form and have given consent, written or verbally, to participate in this research and that their interviews were recorded. Informed consent also means that the interviewees are voluntary participants, and they can withdraw their consent at any time (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014:107). The interviewees did not acquire any monetary compensation for participation in this study. The interviewees' names or anything that could reveal their identities have been anonymised and their data have been kept secure in password protected technical appliances. The data gathered for this research will not be used in any other way than for academic use.

Analysis

In this part of the study, analysis of the gathered data will be done with regards to the research questions as a foundation, to answer the aims of this study. All the names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees. The analysis will be divided into main themes, and then these themes will be discussed with the help of previous research and the thematic method of analysis. The main themes that emerged while analysing the collected materials were those of gender, household labor and equality. The under themes, that will be discussed withing the main themes are; upbringing, gender roles, division of household labor, gender equality, mental health and this analysis aims to answer the research questions presented earlier on.

Views on gender

How our upbringing affects our own view on household labor is a question that subconsciously was brought up in the interviews. With Sweden being on the forefront with equality and having had policies regarding both equality and the division of household labor (Rönblom & Hudson, 2012; Nyman et.al. 2018), one could possibly assume that these issues have been 'solved' in one way or the other. But the interviews revealed that this is not the case. From most of the interviewees, it seemed that those raised in a two-parent household grew up with traditional gender roles in regard to the household work. This meant that the women were mainly responsible for the kitchen and indoor household work and the men tended to be more in charge of the outside work and the work that entailed technical issues.

The division of 'masculine' and 'feminine' work seemed to be a common theme among the interviewees' upbringings. One respondent said that his upbringing was "*It was probably as stereotypical as it could be. Mom did everything indoors and dad did everything outdoors*" (Anton, 29). Parenthood tends to change the division of household labor but according to Dribe and Stenfors (2009), it appears that over time the traditional gendered division is less pronounced now than it used to be.

For those brought up in a two-person household, all of the respondents seem to have a very 'traditional' upbringing, where the parents mostly dealt with their 'traditional' roles when it came to household labor. This entailed that the mothers dealt with the indoor things, such as cleaning and cooking, whereas the fathers mostly dealt with the outside, technical and manual labor types of household labor. One interviewee said that "*Yeah my mom did more, I can't ever remember seeing my dad vacuum the house*" (Martin, 38). Where another respondent said that "*it was very obvious, all household work was on my mom's side whereas my dad took care of the practical and technical stuff... my mom did all the cleaning, cooking and doing the dishes.*" (Patric, 39). But there are differences since no one will have the exact same upbringing as the another.

One of the interviewees said that during her upbringing, the division of household labor was traditional, with the exception that "*... mom cooked the regular food and dad cooked the crazy and fun food.*" (Lisa, 44). In this instance, one could argue that this corresponds to the stereotype that men tend to do the 'fun things', for example do the grilling during a BBQ, when women tend to do everything else that needs to get done. Maybe this could signal a change towards a more equal relationship, or does it just go into yet another gender specific stereotype? This can be discussed with regards to the subject of 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987), although in this context it would entail that we perform gender with what kind of chores we do. All the interviewees had the same idea of what 'feminine' or 'masculine' chores were, and if a parent stepped out of the societal 'normal' chores for their gender, then it was brought up and discussed. For the interviewees who were raised by single moms, the explanation that came up was that the mom took on both the male and female part of the household labor. She would do everything that needed to be done for the household to run smoothly. Carlson et. al (2018) writes that in regard to "doing gender", housework is vital, and that housework could be a way in which men and women build traditional masculinity and femininity. This was not seen directly when talking to the interviewees, but

how they talked about their upbringing it was obvious that that they all had a clear idea about what traditional masculinity and femininity looked like with regards to household labor.

Since most of the respondents seemed to have been brought up with parents who had traditional gender roles, one can further explore the concept of 'doing gender'. Everybody seemed to have the same idea of what different labor was between 'male' and 'female. Using the term of 'Doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987) one can here argue that it is possible that the gender roles that one was brought up with have the possibility of being reproduced during one's own adult life, unless one is aware of them and is of the opinion that they should not be consciously reproduced. This is a lifelong journey, to be able to dissect and consciously reproduce the gender roles that one chooses, not those that one has forced upon oneself, through one's upbringing or society and its demands for certain gender roles.

An action is not specifically feminine, or specifically masculine, per se. Instead, when two people of different genders interact, the result becomes gender specific. Everyone in a society has the possibility to feel, act and think in ways which their culture considers feminine or masculine. The action itself can be performed by the 'wrong' gender, and it means that the action is not bound by gender but due to psychological or biological disposition. The action can be interpreted *as if* it was bound to gender (Holmberg 1993:47). None of the interviewees claimed that household labor was inherently feminine or masculine. But when the question came up about how the divisions of household labor looked while growing up, most of them said that the parents had "traditional roles", meaning that the mother did most of the inside housework and the father did the outside housework. They also acknowledged that yes, the inside labor tends to include tasks that need to be done more often, e.g., cooking, cleaning, washing, when compared to outside labor e.g., mowing the lawn and yard work.

This idea of not 'seeing' what needs to be done seemed to be a recurring theme in a lot of the interviews. *"... and I'm like, eh of course you see it, you're passing it! Is it just laziness or is it like for real that they don't see it? Because it is the way they are raised? Then it must be a consequence of how they were brought up, raised, and norms in society and etcetera, like that"* (Anna, 28). Another one said that *"well, yeah, I do not think that he is good at cleaning. When he has cleaned, I have to go again after him and clean more. He's kind of messy. He does not see this kind of stuff."* (Felicia, 26). This can all be seen as a consequent of how one has been raised and a traditional view on gender and division of work.

Views on household labor

Regarding the topic of household labor, which is something most of us must deal with on at least a weekly basis, the interviewees had a wide range of options in regard to this. The most common first sentence was that it is somewhat of a “necessary evil”⁸. A few of the respondents had, now during the pandemic, outsourced⁹ some of the household labor by getting a robot vacuum cleaner, which freed up some of the time that would otherwise be spent doing that household labor. This can be discussed in the similarity to how Shelton and John (1996) brought up the “labor saving devices” and how they potentially could benefit women who wanted to enter the labor force. Household work still had to be performed and outsourcing, in one way or another, will of course help to free up time for the couple so they could spend their time on more enjoyable tasks.

For some of the interviewees the line appeared to be unchanged. One of the interviewees worked from home prior to the pandemic, and his routines had therefore not changed significantly after the pandemic started. His partner on the other hand had not worked from home before the pandemic and for her this had changed everything. The line between the two, paid and unpaid work, seemed to have become blurred for her. She could do some housework in her small breaks during the day, that, when working in the office might have been spent talking to co-workers or having a coffee break. But this is not without its conflicts, since only one of the partners started doing more chores while working from home and the interviewee said, “*how hard can it be to just turn on a load of laundry*”.

When talking about household work, one participant answered, “*it feels like it’s the only thing I do*” (Felicia, 26). This seems to be a common thought for the female participants, although not something that is completely true for everyone. A majority did appear to believe that there was an unevenness in the division of household work, and it appears that it had not changed in a desirable way during the Covid-19 pandemic, even with more time spent at home. This notion that housework was something that women spend more time on corresponds with what other scholars claim (Forsell, 2021; Presser, 1994; Shelton & John, 1996).

⁸ Swedish: “nödvändigt ont”

⁹ The respondents themselves claimed that this (e.g., the robot vacuum cleaner) as one sort of outsourcing of household labor.

There seemed to be a wide difference in how often things are being done and in what is considered household work. The answers ranged from a couple hours a week to 20 hours a week spent on doing household work. Some relationships seemed to be more equal in their division of labor than others, but it appeared that the ongoing theme was that the women did, or felt like they did, more of the household work than their male partners. In some instances, the males agreed to this statement, and it seemed like a lot of the men said “yeah I could do more” in a sense. This correlates with previous research that states that men not only do less household work, but also their quality of said work is not as high as for their female partners (Stanford, 2018). Felicia, 26 said that “*If I don’t do it, it won’t be done*”, implying that she does most, or all the household work, within her relationship. This finding, along with women doing most of the household work, has been shown before in previous research (Holmberg, 1993; Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Reinikainen, 2020).

The notion that women take on the biggest part of the household labor is not uncommon and has been shown in previous research (Holmberg, 1993; Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Reinikainen, 2020; Presser, 1994; Shelton & John, 1996). Anna, 28, had noticed the difference between men and women and the division of household work within her own group of friends and said, “*Ahh I wonder like, why is it so common (...) that the guys don’t see the household labor. Why is it like that?*” (Anna, 28). Regarding the issue of the quality of the household labor, one interviewee said “*Yeah, I guess there is a difference here, my partner would say that what I do (e.g., cleaning) is not up to her standard. It’s probably more towards this way than the other way. (...) I’m more like ‘close enough is good enough’*.” (Martin, 38). Here it seems that the male partner in this relationship is the one with the least demands for the quality of the household labor, but this did not seem to be the case for all the participants. For example, Vanessa's partner was the one in their relationship who seemed to care the most about cleanliness and order.

The division of work and then household labor and/or free time has changed a lot with the pandemic. With more people working from home, it is easy that the lines blur and that work bleeds into free time and vice versa. One of the interviewees said that, regarding the division of paid labor/unpaid labor and free time, “*Hmm yeah, I think it's hard to separate them on weekdays, even when I have gotten home, I can easily check my work mail in the evening ...*” (Lisa, 44). A lot of the participants said that when working from home, it was easy that the paid workday blended with unpaid work, household labor, and also with the free time. With

no set schedule and time to commute, the hours of the day tend to blend in ways that they did not do before the pandemic and its effect on this division.

One of the participants said that, in regards to household work and Covid-19, *“Yeah when I was home there in the middle of corona, my partner felt that I should have done more, since I spent all that time at home, more of the household labor because I did not have to go to work for 8 hours (e.g. like she did) plus getting ready in the morning...”* (Martin, 38). Here it appears that the respondent was the one with more time spent at home, compared to his partner who at the time still worked on-site, and yet it appeared that the division of household labor did not change during that time. Here it appears that the two partners disagree on how the division of household labor should change, given the effects of remote work and more time spent at home. This corresponds to what the UN Women report shows that the pandemic has instead widened the gender inequalities (UN Women, 2020).

When asked who bore the burden for most part of the mental labor in their relationships, which is a big part of the household labor and which previous research discusses (Arnell-Szurkos, 2020; Bianchi et. Al., 2012; Lam et.al., 2012; Presser, 1994), the answers varied but the common theme was that the female partner in the relationship took responsibility for most of the mental labor, with regards to planning life, including planning around household work. In Arlie Hochschild’s study, she found that in the couples where the men shared the ‘second shift’ with their female partner, they enjoyed a happier home life (1989:216). The mental work or household labor, labelled as ‘the third shift’ by Arnell-Szurkos (2020), is also something that the interviewees had different views on. An interviewee stated, in reply to his partner taking care of most of the mental labor in regard to household work, etcetera; *“The mental labor Maria does to 100%. I take each day as it comes, whereas Maria wants to plan what we do, purchases etc... And yeah, we have discussed it (e.g., the division). But it’s hard, it’s like just not something that comes naturally for me, to sit and think about it. I just think things work out. And it does. But a lot is thanks to Maria and that she plans things.”* (Anton, 29). The mental part of the household work appeared to be an almost forgotten part of the daily life in some couples. It seemed that it was being taken for granted, or not thought about too deeply, depending on which partner who took on the most of the labor. In some instances, the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to have helped the division to become more equal. For example, Anna, 28 said that it was mostly she who that did most of the mental planning but *“but it has helped now (e.g., with Covid-19) that we have actually divided it more together,*

and that like, I think it is good for both of us when we actually plan things". This did not appear to be an overall equal division of the mental part of household labor in their relationship, but it still seemed that some change was happening. The same interviewee also said that, regarding the planning part of the household labor "... *but I think it is me who takes charge the most often, like okay now we really need to clean this weekend. Or like if we need to write a grocery list, then it's me who usually takes on that planning...*" (Anna, 28). This is a strong example of how the division of the mental labor, the third shift (Arnell-Szurkos, 2020), often falls upon the female partner in the relationships, and hence it is not divided equally within a lot of relationships.

Another participant described the question of mental labor with; "*Well, the planning part, at least when it comes to food, does my partner. But that is also because he disses my suggestions for food and cooking. So, then it has been like, he plans for the food so he can get what he wants*". (Felicia, 26). So here in this relationship it appears that the male partner in the relationship does help with the mental labor, but only because he desires things to be done in his way. Other participants seemed to divide things in a more equal way. Patric, 39, for example said about mental labor and its division that they divide things equally, with some small differences in who did what, but the overall view was that the division of household labor, mental planning, was divided in an equal way. In that instance one can argue that even though in a lot of instances the division of household work and mental work is not equal, this is of course not the case for everyone.

Even though it appears that the women tended to do most of the mental labor, the planning part, that was not always the case. One of the interviewees spoke about their division of mental labor as; "*Yeah, we do that together. We are usually good at routines. My partner is better at routines than me, so it is usually him who pulls more on that, "now we should plan for the week, should we order groceries", ... So, I experience that it is more him who takes initiative to the planning, like we should do this and that. So, the natural division is more on his initiative, most often, but then we do the things together*" (Vanessa, 28). In this relationship it was the male partner who did the most of the mental labor.

With all of this in mind, it appears that the mental labor, the third shift, does not solely fall upon the female partner in the relationship, even though the overall answer leaned towards that the female partner did most of the mental labor, the planning, in the relationship.

This corresponds to what Eversson and Nyman (2009) wrote that Swedish couples let routine and rituals guide in how they organise their daily lives. This corresponds to question one and how the respondents view gender and how hard it can be to ‘undo’ gender.

The changes that the pandemic has brought on, has affected a lot more than just the physical aspect of working from home. This is something that is vital to discuss and one of the foundations to the whole research, the effect of Covid-19. Many of the respondents discussed the toll the pandemic has had on their mental health, and it was a theme that arose in the interviews. The isolation, both from work and from friends, and other things had impacted several of the respondents negatively. Anna, 28, said that she thinks the pandemic has caused a lot of mental health issues. Her partner, Martin, 38, said that he himself had experienced mental health issues that the pandemic had caused, at least indirectly with added stress from work. Vanessa, 28, noted that working from home without having those natural pauses that you have at the office can add to the stress and be a cause of deteriorating mental health. Another interviewee, Gustav, 32, said that: *“Yeah with corona and working from home (and losing a job in the beginning of the pandemic) “yeah so I basically lost all my friends without saying goodbye, and you can’t see each other because the pandemic ...it becomes very, very isolating...”*. (Gustav, 32). From the interviews, it is clear that a lot of the participants experienced negative effects on their mental health. It is hard to say who has experienced more of this, men, or women, but it appears to be an ongoing concern. Adams-Prassl et.al. (2020) showed that in their research, the increased level of the workload for women due to the pandemic, did surge the level of mental health issues for women.

This brings us to the point that when the paid work changed, to distance working from home or some even losing their jobs, the division of household labor changed as well. Reichelt et.al (2020) writes that when men lost their job during the pandemic, they were pushed into a more non-traditional division of labor, going from being the traditional ‘bread-winner’ towards a more egalitarian relationship. In the interviews, it seemed that in most instances the men tended to turn toward a more traditional division of labor when work changed. For example, Felicia, 26 noted that when her partner temporarily worked from home and therefore had more time that could be spent on household labor, the opposite instead happened, and Felicia felt that he spent even less time than before on household labor.

Furthermore, regarding whether or not Covid-19 and working from home created more conflicts with regard to household labor, one of the interviewees said: *“the honest answer is probably less, because I feel that I have more time to do it, I don’t have a problem doing it, whereas before I put more focus on like, ‘ this is not equal, you have to do more, come on now’. But now I feel like I don’t have a problem with like load that extra washing machine, now when I have more time over. But this is a bad argument, “yeah we have less conflicts now because I do more”* (Maria, 28). So, in this case Covid-19 and working from home had brought on a more ‘positive’ change in that, more things got done, but the division of this labor had not become more equal, but instead the opposite. Elin, 36 said that being at home more had changed the level of household labor that was being performed *“Yeah I think we’re cleaning more now, because we are all the time at home and when you see that, when you have OCD a little bit, and see like ‘yeah we should clean that, and we should clean that”. When you’re not at home you are not seeing that’.*”. This implies that, during the pandemic, with all the extra time spent at home, the level of cleaning has gone up due to more time spent in the same space. This could be seen as a base for the rise of conflicts. Elin also said that, regarding the level of conflicts during the pandemic regarding household labor; *“I think it’s more conflicts actually. Because we are living together, 24 hours, always together, and it’s hard. It might not have to do with household labor and the ‘housewife thing’ but more of like living together with someone 24 h and.... Yeah, it’s hard to not have conflict”*. So, in this instance the pandemic itself might not have affected the level of conflicts in regard to household labor, but more the issue of spending so much time at home with only one other person that creates more conflicts. The pandemic, and remote work with a lot more time spent at home, has put a strain on a lot of relationships. Arnell-Szurkos (2020) study shows that women tend to feel more stressed over household work than men. This has the possibility of creating conflicts as well.

With regards to who does which household chores and what needs to be done, one interviewee said that *“... Well, no, but it is that I have a different view on what that should be done, like doing the dishes every day for example or cleaning at least every other week, then I start to like really see the dirt, while my partner can say like “oh wow, what, I did not see that”, like that he does not see it (e.g. the dirt) ...”*. (Anna, 28).

An ongoing theme here seemed to be that it was, as much other research shows as well, the women in the relationships who do more of the household work. Even in relationships that

tended to be equal with intentional discussions of the topics of equality and household work, there appeared to be a disconnect between intention and execution. One respondent said: *“I could do some more, with the household labor. I don’t even react, or think about it, before it is already done”* (Anton, 29). All these issues can be seen as part of the division of both the second shift and the third shift, where women appear to take on both a higher amount of the unpaid work at home, as well as the mental labor.

When asked if Covid-19 has affected the quality of the household labor, now when a lot of us are spending a lot of time at home, Karin said; *“Ahh, maybe a little bit better actually. One has time to think ahead, time to sit down and make a menu for the week, ..., more planning earlier in time, because otherwise it can get a bit impulsive, but more planning and yeah more quality”* (Karin, 31). This implies that they now share more of the tasks that need to get done. This corresponds to previous research that shows that contemporary couples share the routine tasks more often than previously, historically speaking (Carlson et.al, 2018).

Equality

The Swedish Gender Equality Agency, wrote in 2020 that the coronavirus could potentially lead to a more equal society with people spending more time at home, even though it was too soon to tell. This has so far appeared to not be the case, but sadly quite the opposite. As previous research done in this field of equality and household labor has shown, young couples look for a partner that they can share both the financial and domestic responsibilities with (Carlson et. al 2018:1,2).

All of the respondents said that equality was something that was important for them, but research shows that pursuing equality does not always equate with achieving equality. Sweden has one of the highest levels of equality in the world. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, Sweden ranks number one in the European Union on the Gender Equality Index. (EIGE, 2020). When asked about what the interviewees thought that equality meant for them a lot of them tended to respond with “equal pay for equal work” but also that equality in relationships were important to them, and that the division of household labor is a big part of this. This implies that people do care about an equal division of labor and that it is something that they wanted to strive towards.

One interviewee said that *“yes I am the project manager for our household”*. Even in relationships that seemed equal where the partners were aware and had knowledge about these topics, it appeared that most of the mental labor was done by the female partner. This corresponds to what previous research has shown, where it appears that women take the main responsibility for both most of the household labor as well as the mental labor behind it, what Arnell-Szurkos (2020) talks about as the ‘third shift’. Being the one who always takes care of the mental labor in a relationship can be draining, and research has shown that during the ongoing pandemic, women have had a bigger drop in mental health (Adams-Prassl et.al, 2020). Equality is of vital importance for a lot of people, which shows in this study, where all of the individuals interviewed agreed that equality is something that is important, both in society at large and for them personally. This corresponds to Hook’s (2010) research, that said that in which country one lived affects the character of gender inequality. In Sweden, which has actively worked towards a more equal society through policies since the 1970s (Nyman et. al., 2018), one can assume that people living in Sweden value equality.

Even in couples that were highly educated and had an overall high level of self-described equality, there were still some findings in the interviews that not all participants were satisfied with the level of gender equality. Maria, 28 said that *“I should not have to enlighten him, (e.g., on the issues of equality)”*, implying that equality should be a topic that both partners should strive towards, be more aware of, and learn more about. Reinikainen (2020) writes that even in relationships in areas (like Sweden) where people consciously strive towards equality, there still is an unequal division of household labor. Here we can see as well that the issue of unequal division of mental labor, the third shift, is something that seemingly affects a lot of couples from various backgrounds. Research has shown that the effects the pandemic have on equality, have pushed the time frame for gender equality forwards by decades (Bülow, 2021, 21 February). In regard to Maria and Anton’s relationship and their thoughts on equality, where both of them wanted to have an equal relationship but did not appear to be there yet, this corresponds very well to what Weismann et.al (2008) writes, that even within couples who want to divide their work equally, they still commonly end up splitting the housework more consistent with traditional patterns.

When asked what would make their relationship more equal, one interviewee said *“...that one takes on that responsibility. Like that it is not “I did not see the dishes”, for example. Because that’s gonna lead to that I am being punished, because I do see it (e.g., the dishes).*

then I have to do it because I am being bothered by it and I don't think that's so nice...”

(Anna, 28). Equality seemed to be an important issue for all the interviewees, but not everyone thought that their relationship was equal, even though most agreed that they wanted it to be. The respondents' views on equality, was similar but not the same. How one defined equality and whether that made their relationship equal or not varied. One respondent said about equality in relationships that; *“One wouldn't want someone else to come into our relationship and say, ‘that this is equal, you should do it like this’, we will agree together on what works. So, it's both equality with the freedom of choice that works for us”* (Lisa, 44). Lisa claims that equality in her relationship is something that she and her partner together will decide upon. It is not something that comes from outside their own relationship but is instead something internal, not external. In the example of Lisa, we can see the recreation of patterns which are chosen to be recreated by the couple. It could be something that occurs subconsciously, or it could be an active choice to recreate said patterns of gender division. Equality between the genders can of course be something that the individuals within relationships experience differently. What they want to achieve and how they perceive where they are, but to some extent there must be some kind of pervasive goal that has to become reality for true equality to be reached. According to Stanford (2018) Sweden is one of the most equal countries in the world, but still women do more unpaid work than men, and until that is no longer true, Sweden will never be truly equal.

One of the respondents, when responding to whether or not equality was important for them in their relationship, said, *“Yes, because I saw that it wasn't in my parents (e.g., relationship) and how it is destructive for you and your children”* (Gustav, 32). He saw that, in his opinion, an unequal relationship could be destructive, and it was therefore not something that he wanted in his own relationship. He noted that the inequality would not only affect the partners in the relationship, but also their children, yet he could also see that his own relationship is not yet, in his opinion, equal. *Q: Do you think your relationship is equal?* *“No, it's not. ... “I want it to be equal, because I saw it in my parents, when only one has the money and I don't want that, there's this imbalance in the relationship that I don't like”*. The old traditional view on the division of paid and unpaid labor often means that the male's role in the relationship was as the breadwinner, the one that provided the paid labor. Male breadwinner regimes (Walby, 2009) are not something that is the only possible division of labor. This is not the only way to divide anymore, due to the rise of the dual earner family (Presser, 1994; SOU, 2014), where both men and women engage in the paid workforce, and

which was the case in all the interviewees. In all of the interviewees' relationships, both partners engaged in some kind of paid labor and therefore shared the responsibility of providing income for the household.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the nuances that this research provides do appear to concur with previous research from both Sweden and other countries, even though a lot of previous research has included couples with children and that the Swedish gender policies do not seem to pay attention to household labor as much as equality within the workforce. For example, this research indicated that it appeared that the division of household labor had not changed drastically among the couples, and it did not appear to have become more equal between the genders. Research from other countries on similar topics has shown that overall, this seems to be a phenomenon occurring in most instances. The slow-moving patterns and structures that have been seen previously, appear to still be present. Change occurs, but at a very slow pace. Some individuals seem open to change and do recognise the inequalities within their relationships, and others either do not see or have inequalities that do not appear to bother them. But change does occur, and Lam. et.al (2012) notices the same, that over time it appears that within couple relationships, gender equality with regard to everyday labor could improve. That said, it is still very easy to fall back into already made, traditional, patterns and to be able to break those patterns one has to be aware of them and consciously aim towards undoing them. Undoing gender (Deutch, 2007) is gonna be a lifelong journey, for those who want to continue on towards a more gender equal life.

One must also have in mind that this research's results, by default, will be partially one sided, since its focus is on individuals in heterosexual relationships, who can work from home. Not everyone can work from home, and then it will also turn into an issue of class, with everything that entails. Another thing that is worth mentioning is that by choosing individuals from a wide age span and wide selection of professions, the study's conclusions can be perceived as not specific enough, but that as well is something that will always be the critique of qualitative research and does not mean that it is not valid and sound research. While quantitative research has more of a potential to be quantifiable, qualitative research can dig deeper and ask questions that surveys, and graphs could not grasp in the same way.

The results of this study should not in any way be something that can be taken out of this small context and then applied to a greater mass, but that is rarely what qualitative research aims to do. Instead, this research was designed to study these particular subjects and see if they had experienced changes due to the effects of Covid-19. The pandemic has affected all of us, in one way or another, and the strive for equality seems to have been halted, but hopefully just temporary. With more people working from home, more time spent inside in a place where work and free time blend together is bound to create some new issues. This correlates with what some of the respondents in this study said, that even though more time was spent at home, with the possibility of a more equal division of labor, this did not occur often within the participants' relationships. This also somewhat corresponds to what Chwioroth and Walter (2019) states; that crisis appears to heighten already standing problems and make them more distinct and pronounced. This means that if couples had an unequal division of labor before the pandemic, chances are their division is even more unequal during the pandemic.

The results can be seen in comparison to Carin Holmberg's study, researching a very similar topic without the pandemic aspects. Holmberg (1993) found that in heterosexual relationships with couples without children, the male over female hierarchy was both upheld and recreated. This is something that from this study did not appear to be the case to the same extent. The awareness of what is considered equal and what is considered satisfactory in a relationship appeared to be something that a lot of the couples had discussed consciously within their relationships. On the other hand, a gap still seemed to exist between what the couples, or at least the individuals within the couples, wanted their division of the household work to become.

We have seen in previous research how the pandemic has affected the level of gender equality in other countries (Kristal & Yaish, 2020; Farré et.al, 2020; Alon et.al, 2020; Sevilla & Smith, 2020; Zamberlan et. al., 2021; Craig, 2020; Bülow, 2021, 21 February). It appears that in most places, the pandemic has affected the level of equality negatively, and it could therefore be reasonable to assume that Sweden has been affected in similar ways. This appears to be the case, according to recent research (Arbetsvärlden, 2021; Forsell, 2021). Regarding the conclusions that could potentially be drawn from this research, evidence shows that the level of equality, with regards to the gendered division of household labor, has not been impacted positively, according to the interviewees. One reason for this could also be

that, as Nyman et. al. (2018) writes, that Swedes have a “self-understanding” as being equal, no matter what the reality is. Perhaps some of the respondents think of themselves as already equal and therefore the strive towards more equality seems unnecessary.

Regarding the outcome from this study, one can argue that the level of equality in said relationships did not appear to have become more even during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the role that gender plays in this division of paid/unpaid labor still played a fundamental part. Deutsch (2007) writes that ‘undo gender’ is what the focus should be on, instead of ‘doing gender’, which can be interpreted as though gender oppression is inevitable. This is something that could be seen in the data. One of the male respondents said that he should probably step up more to be more on level with his partner, and there seemed to be an awareness of the need for equality in some of the relationships. Yes, in some instances the gender roles were very ‘traditional’ in regard to who did what, and they thereby seemed to solidify the roles by ‘doing gender’ according to society. But on the other hand, there was also a willingness to change, even though it did not seem to have been followed through in all instances. There is potential for change, at least in some of the respondents' lives. It also must be noted that most of the respondents had received higher education and lived in bigger cities, which most definitely can influence the results. How much willingness there is to ‘undo gender’ within couples with a lower degree of education in the countryside this research cannot say, and it could potentially be another study since it could be of interest to compare the two.

Going back to the gender equality goals set by the Swedish Gender Equality Agency, they are of high importance, maybe even higher now with the effects of the pandemic than they were before. But how attainable are these goals? And do they take into consideration the class issues that this pandemic inevitably will bring to the surface? Only people within certain socioeconomic classes can work from home and can socially distance themselves. The goals set by the Swedish Gender Equality Agency could be hard to realize, but that does not mean that they should not still be pursued. Regarding the ‘second shift’ (Hochschild, 1989) and everything that sentiment entail, this research has shined light on that, even in such an equal country like Sweden (Rönblom & Hudson, 2012; Nyman et.al., 2018) and even with people spending more time at home due to distance work during the pandemic, there is still an unequal division of household labor within these households. Of course, this research does not speak for all of the Swedish population, it only aims to show visibility to my data, but it

does correspond to previous research made in this field and shows similarities to how the progress has gone in other countries also affected by the pandemic. It does appear that the pandemic has indeed boosted the social and cultural gender norms in a lot of parts of the world, and Sweden is no exception.

Further research

To further the research done in this study, it would be interesting to investigate the division in same-gendered couples during the pandemic. Have they seen similar results to what other studies have shown? It would also be worthwhile scientific research to study these themes in approximately a year from now, when the pandemic has hopefully subsided, and we can possibly see the long-lasting effects of this global crisis. What has changed and what has stayed the same? It could also be of interest to narrow down this study even further, to only focus on one occupation or profession, or to narrow down the age span even further. The narrower the scope, the easier it would be to draw more precise conclusions.

Furthermore, since this research substantially focused on individuals in more of a middle/upper class setting, it would be of scientific interest to modify and redo this research with couples from other class backgrounds. Perhaps investigating couples whose work could not be done from home or whose work made them spend even more time at their workplace, would be a study worth pursuing and taken further. Another suggestion for further research would be if one added in children and childcare into this equation. If this research were to be done in 5 years, and maybe some of the couples had decided to have children, would we find, that as Dribe and Stanford (2009) write, that the gendered division would turn even more traditional after couples decide to have children? Even though in their study it seemed that from the 1990s to the 2000s the division turned more equal, other researchers have also shown that the change is small (Statistics Sweden, 2019). One can only hope that the strive for gender equality will continue to go forward, even though some statistics speak against any drastic change in the near future (Arbetsvärlden, 2021; Bülow, 2021, 21 February).

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Questions asked during the interview and data gathering part for this research.

Part 1: Background

- Who are you?
- How old are you?
- What is your level of education?
- What do you work with/profession?
- How long have you been in this relationship?
- How long have you lived together?

Part 2: Work

- How long have you worked with what you do?
- Has your work changed due to corona, and if so, how?
 - The psychological and social part of work?
 - The practical aspect of work
- If you work from home – how long have you done so?
 - Is it fulltime from home or smaller parts?
 - How are your work hours divided?
- Working hours?
 - Before corona – Fulltime or parttime? Set hours or flexible hours?
- What did your view of work look like before the pandemic?
- Have the demands from your employer changed during corona?
- Have your working hours changed? (less commuting now etc?)
- Has the content of your work changed? (e.g., more/less digital meetings)

Part 3: Household labor

- What do you put into the label household work?
- How do you view household work?
- What counts as household work?
- Would you say that you agree on what counts?
- Are you in agreement about what should be done? (e.g., cleaning, how often, how much)
 - What has to be done?
- How much time is spent every week on household work?
- Is there a difference in who does what?
- How would you describe the division of housework before corona?
- Did this division happen naturally?
 - Why is the work divided like this?
- How was the division of work for you growing up? Between your parents?
- How is the quality of work for each partner?
 - Does it cause friction between you, or do you agree on the level of quality?

- Has the quality of work been better or worse during corona?
- Do you outsource work? (RUT) If so, what parts of the household work do you outsource?
 - If you could, what part would you outsource?
- How did a normal morning look like with household work before corona?
 - Now?
- How did a normal afternoon/evening look like with household work before corona?
 - Now?

Household labor after the pandemic started

- How would you describe your household work now after the pandemic?
 - Has anything changed? What?
- More or less conflict in regard to the division of your household labor?

The relation between paid work and unpaid work

- Would you say the relation between paid work and unpaid work has changed? In that case, what has changed?
-
- How do you handle the division between the paid work/unpaid household work/free time? Before corona?
- After corona, now working from home?
- Has the division become easier, harder? More or less conflicts in regard to this?
- This division between paid and unpaid work, is it something that you discuss internally?

Part 4: Equality

Is equality in general, in society, important for you?

- What is equality for you?
- Is equality in relationships important to you?
 - Do you think your relationship is equal?
 - If not – what would have to change for the relationship to be equal?
 - If yes – what is it that makes your relationship equal? The most important part

The end:

- Is there something else I should have asked about? Do you want to add something?
- Is corona changing something more long term?

Reflections for the future:

- Do you think you will continue on with some of the changes that the corona pandemic has made happen?

The interviewees

Here follows a brief clarification and deeper information of the interviewees. But firstly, note that since these interviews ended up being with a somewhat convenience sampling the details will not be too precise due to the need to protect their anonymity, instead more general data about them will here be provided.

The interviews took place in the spring of 2021, March, and April. The interviewees that participated had been together with their partner for a variety of time, but at least so long that they had been living together for the pandemic and had therefor experienced its effects on their relationship. The choice of couples without children was done due to the idea that they could potentially have a higher amount of gender equality in their relationship.

To provide a representative background of how Sweden is built today the interviewees are all living in Sweden now, but not everyone is born in Sweden. Approximately three out of the 11 interviewees have a different national background. All the interviewees live in connection to a bigger city, or in a bigger city, and most of the interviewees have also completed, or are in the duration of, completing a higher education. This makes my respondents a somewhat homogenous group and that must be mentioned to be able to understand their responses. This choice was made due to the need for them to have been affected by the pandemic in a way that would entail remote work done distanced.