

Success Factor Negotiation: The Covid-19 Pandemic as an Opportunity Structure

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Abstract: This work-in-progress paper provides insight into the conception and the empirical procedure within the project "Success Factor Negotiation – The Covid-19 pandemic as an Opportunity Structure for (Re)Shaping the Negotiation Culture in Couple Relationships." The project analyses couple relationships in Germany with regard to techniques of negotiation established during the pandemic and their impact on participation and career opportunities for women. The crisis in the field of (institutional) childcare that accompanied the pandemic has created a special situation in which everyday practices, routines, and rituals that often prevailed in everyday life had to be radically changed or redesigned. This in turn created an "opportunity structure" for negotiation in the private sphere of couple relationships. The negotiation skills developed and negotiation strategies and techniques practiced during this period of upheaval can become a decisive lever for the "post-Corona period" in order to question existing role models and the social orders associated with them. Studies dealing with conflict of compatibility in the Covid-19 pandemic to date have been primarily based on quantitative methods and paint a contradictory picture of how couples have dealt with the tension between family work and employment. This is where the project comes in, using a qualitative approach to investigate the role that negotiations played in dealing with the changed conditions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, we add a new dimension to previous studies by not only examining the results of conflict of compatibility and role distribution, but also shedding light on how these conflicts have been resolved. Thereby, we identify negotiation patterns that influence the extent of egalitarian distribution of family work on the one hand and the assertion of career ambitions on the other hand.

Keywords: negotiation, couple relationships, conflicts of compatibility, Covid-19

1. Research objective and research questions

The Covid-19 pandemic, and in particular, the crisis in the field of (institutional) childcare that accompanied the pandemic created a special situation in which everyday practices, routines, and rituals had to be radically changed or redesigned. This led to an extraordinary situation, which we understand as an "opportunity structure" for negotiation in the private sphere of couple relationships. The negotiation skills developed and practiced during this period of upheaval can become a decisive lever for the "post-Corona period" in order to question existing role models and the social orders associated with them. In this context, the main research objective of the project "Success Factor Negotiation – The Covid-19 pandemic as an Opportunity Structure" is to examine couple relationships in Germany with regard to techniques of negotiation established during the pandemic and their impact on career opportunities for women.

Specifically, the following research questions will be addressed:

- How did negotiations between couples take place, and to what extent did they perpetuate or change existing everyday practices and routines?
- To what extent was the use of negotiation in the couple context associated with an assertion of career goals?
- Which negotiation techniques have a career-enhancing or career-inhibiting effect?
- In what ways were contextual factors such as the opportunity for home office, a system-relevant occupation, the employer's attitude, or parental leave experiences brought into the negotiation as a resource?
- To what extent do the negotiation experiences of the crisis situation affect the organization of everyday life in a post-pandemic world?

2. Current research situation and conceptual background

Since the beginning of the Corona crisis, various studies have been conducted on gender asymmetries with regard to the division of care work arising in the wake of the lockdown and the related closure of institutional

childcare in Germany. Overall, these studies conclude that women bore the brunt of family work during the crisis, for example, were more likely to reduce their working hours (Holst et al., 2021; Bujard et al., 2020; Hipp and Bünning, 2021; Kohlrausch and Zucco, 2020; Zoch et al., 2021; Zoch et al., 2020). However, this finding does not yet allow an answer to the questions of whether this is a return to traditional role patterns, whether the still prevailing role patterns are merely being perpetuated, or whether there are signs of a de-traditionalization in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, although in absolute terms the main burden of family work was borne by women before and during the pandemic. A closer look at the respective studies reveals a contradictory picture. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic is definitely accompanied by an increased participation of men in family work. Men have experienced a higher absolute increase in time spent on family work (Bujard et al., 2020, p. 38; Globisch and Osiander, 2020). Also the share of fathers who report taking on the greater part of caregiving increased from 6 to 12 percent during the first lockdown (Kohlrausch and Zucco, 2020, p. 6). Hipp and Bünning observe a more egalitarian distribution of family work during the lockdown in spring of 2020, but this distribution declined over time (Hipp and Bünning, 2021, p. 667). Household-specific structures such as short-time work or the possibility of home office for only one partner ensured that the latter took over a larger share of family work (Hipp and Bünning, 2021, p. 668). Furthermore, a higher level of education and less traditional role models were associated with a lower proportion of constellations in which only mothers took care of the children (Zoch et al., 2020, p. 12, p. 18). This contrasts with findings that even women working in system-relevant occupations and not having the option of home office, often took on the care of younger children alone (Zoch et al., 2020, p. 16). Moreover, it was found that the number of couples who shared care work equally decreased (Kohlrausch und Zucco, 2020, p. 7; Hank und Steinbach, 2021, p. 104).

Overall, it remains an open question how and why couples prioritized family work and career in a certain way and how they used their respective situations (e.g. home-office, system-relevant occupation) as a negotiating resource. This is where our project comes in. It follows the tradition of sociological research concerning couple relationships that works with the terms negotiation and negotiation process. These concepts are used to describe and explain how agreements (e.g. with regard to the intrafamilial division of tasks) are reached, and, in general, joint life is organized (e.g. Willen and Stein, 2017; Peukert, 2015). Specifically, the project uses the concept of the negotiated order and the dialectical approach of Anselm Strauss as a theoretical framework. Strauss assumed that social orders are created through negotiation, i.e. through both explicit argumentation and non-verbal utterances (gazes, gestures, mini-actions), and that these negotiations are in turn contingent to specific structural conditions (Strauss, 1978). Our project uses his dialectical perspective, but in contrast to previous research it focuses more on explicit negotiation. Explicit negotiation can be defined as a "back-and-forth communication designed to reach an agreement when you and the other side have some interests that are shared and others that are opposed" (Fisher et al., 1991, p. xvii).

Negotiation in this narrower sense has also been studied by Evertsson and Nyman with a view to intrafamilial distribution of roles and tasks. The researchers identified explicit negotiation in particular situations "in which the taken-for-granted character of everyday life was questioned and no given or established routines or rituals applied or existed" (Evertsson and Nyman, 2009, p. 42). It is precisely such disruptions that are characteristic of the Corona crisis. For this reason, the Covid-19 pandemic created a unique field situation for the research question addressed here, namely the extent to which explicit negotiation is relevant for the intrafamilial distribution of roles and tasks and thus also for the assertion of partners' career ambitions.

3. Research design and methods

Previous studies addressing the conflict of reconciling career and care responsibilities during the Covid-19 pandemic have been primarily based on quantitative methods. As mentioned before, they focus on the outcome perspective and paint a contradictory picture of how couples dealt with the tension between family work and employment. In doing so, they fail to answer the question of how conflicts of compatibility and role distribution have been resolved. We use a qualitative approach to investigate how and why certain decisions were made and to shed light on the role that negotiations played in dealing with the changed conditions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The sample is composed of heterosexual or homosexual couples in which both partners pursue a career ambition and work fulltime. By focusing on full-time workers, we can rule out effects of a (re)traditionalization of role models caused by parenthood and focus on the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on role distribution and its negotiation. These dual-career couples have at least one child of kindergarten or elementary school age. The

comparison between mixed- and same-sex couples allows for a deeper understanding of the meaning of gender-specific role models and gender-typical negotiation behaviour.

In the first phase of the research process, intensive interviews are conducted with the couples, interviewing them both individually and in pairs. The interview transcripts are evaluated using qualitative and quantitative content analysis procedures. Possible categories are:

- What was the negotiation setting like? When, where, how often and how long was the negotiation? Who initiated the negotiation?
- What were the specific "issues" of the negotiation?
- Which common and which different interests were involved?
- Which contextual factors were brought into the negotiation as a resource?
- What was the negotiation process like? Were negotiation strategies pursued? Can specific negotiation tactics be named?
- What were the results of the negotiations? Who was "successful" in the negotiations; who prevailed?
- To what extent do negotiation experiences and results shape current everyday life?

The interview material will also be used to develop role plays for the second phase of the research process. Role plays as a method of change research in action science (Nagler, 2009, p. 140) are a less common instrument in qualitative social research. Yet, they are extraordinarily helpful when it comes to analysing conflict behaviour as well as role ambiguity in a holistic way (Nagler, 2009; Stahlke, 2001).

In concluding group discussions, the role plays are reflected upon by the participants. These discussions are recorded and also evaluated by content analysis. They will provide information on the extent to which the role plays have led to a reflection on one's own (gender-typical) role behaviour. All in all, the project thus employs an innovative mix of methods.

4. Expected results and benefits of the project

In conducting this empirical research, we add a new dimension to previous studies by not only examining the results of conflict of compatibility and role distribution, but also shedding light on *how* these conflicts have been resolved. In doing so, we identify negotiation patterns that influence the extent of egalitarian distribution of family work as well as the assertion of career ambitions.

The results are to serve for a broader understanding of the interplay between career development and gender-specific role and negotiation patterns. They are also planned to provide a starting point for designing concrete training and development programs to enable women (and men) to enhance their negotiation competencies. These are essential in order to address career ambitions or a desire for compatibility with the employer on the one hand and to arrive at a fair distribution of care work in the private sphere on the other. In this sense, the project contributes both to a broader theoretical understanding of gender-effects on role distribution and negotiation and practical application with regard to the empowerment of women. Finally, by an innovative mix of methods, including intensive interviews, group discussions, and role plays, as a method of action science research we aim at contributing to the further development of qualitative empirical social research.

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