“IT JUST MAKES SENSE”: THE DISTRIBUTION OF SPACE AND LABOR FOR COUPLES WHO WORK FROM HOME

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Master of Arts

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

"IT JUST MAKES SENSE": THE DISTRIBUTION OF SPACE AND LABOR FOR COUPLES WHO WORK FROM HOME

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a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Geography,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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An idiosyncrasy of mine is taking great pleasure in regularly reading the acknowledgements page of the novels I finish. I find myself in awe of the number of people it takes to get work written, edited, and published. The emotion behind the author's gratitude for each one of them often stirs my heart. This page is no different.

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Abstract

As a feminist geographer, I am interested in exploring how gendered experiences and expectations intersect with the built environment to reinforce social hierarchies and perpetuate inequality. The traditional division of spaces between the private domain of the home, associated with femininity and domesticity, and the public sphere of work, associated with masculinity and productivity, has long been recognized as a significant contributor to gender inequality. However, the emergence of remote work, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has blurred these boundaries, bringing work into the home and potentially disrupting established gendered norms. This paper seeks to investigate the implications of this shift, particularly for women, who have historically been burdened with the majority of unpaid domestic labor and caregiving responsibilities. Through a series of ten interviews with five couples who work from home, I aim to analyze how they navigate and negotiate the intermingling of work and home spaces, and the distribution of labor and space in the home. By examining the gendered dimensions of the home workplace, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the intersections between gender, work, and the built environment.

Positionality Statement

Positionality is the recognition that bias is unavoidable in research, and the understanding that it is, therefore, imperative to acknowledge how the researcher may be carrying bias into her work. It is an ongoing process of reflexivity and self-discovery. In this spirit, I would like the reader to know that I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle class woman. I am married to a man who works from home full-time, and I work from home more than half of my work week. I also grew up with a father and stepmother who both worked from home full-time. This research is deeply personal to me, and I often find myself in the stories of my participants. This has been helpful but can also leave room for additional bias (explicit and implicit) in my creation, execution, and interpretation of this research. Additionally, because of the nature of my participant recruitment (network sampling), this research encompasses a very small group of individuals who are all similar in many ways to myself, the researcher. This is consistent with the sociological framework that shows people generally find themselves in networks of people with similar lifestyles. All my participants identify as middle-class, generally progressive, married, and white (with one additionally identifying as Hispanic). This has allowed me to empathize and identify with the participants in the interviews. It can also cloud my judgement and analysis, as this is research that is close to home. A constant recognition of this nearness has remained a top priority for me in this study.

Chapter One

Introduction

The home is the emerging workplace of the 21st century in capitalist societies. An estimated 42% of Americans were able to work remotely from home during the COVID-19 pandemic (Warzel and Petersen, 2021). Despite the external turmoil of the pandemic, many at-home workers learned the benefits of remote work, such as saving time from a lack of a commute, the ability to wear more comfortable clothing, and the flexibility to move working hours around during the day to take care of the kids. While some have preferred to return to the corporate office as buildings re-open, many workers are remaining remote, after having perfected their work set-up at home. In particular, according to a LinkedIn Workforce Report analysis by George Anders, which looked at over 5 million job applications between January 2021 and January 2023, women are applying for remote positions at a rate 4 to 5 percentage points higher than men. This could easily be explained when we recognize that "women bear a disproportionate burden from family caregiving responsibilities" (Almeida and Salas-Betsch, 2023): being at home can allow women to have flexibility to keep up their work and home life duties under one roof.

The traditional division of spaces between the private domain of the home, associated with femininity and domesticity, and the public sphere of work, associated with masculinity and productivity, has long been recognized as a significant contributor to gender inequality. However, the emergence of remote work, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has blurred these boundaries, bringing work into the home and potentially disrupting established gendered norms. With the rise of working remotely

from home in America, workers and their co-residents have found themselves negotiating multiple roles and relations under one roof. Feminist geographers have shown how the built environment can exacerbate the subjugation of women, and significant opportunities for research into the ways this subjugation occurs in the home have come out of this societal shift to remote work (Domosh and Seager 2001; Blunt and Dowling 2022).

It is not just academics who are interested in the ways Americans are using their home spaces in this new "at home" era. Three women in the real estate development and architecture industries built a model home in the spring of 2021 that they believe is "a physical manifestation of the behavior and perspective changes about how people perceive and live in their homes today" (America at Home, n.d.). Highly lauded by Forbes, USA Today, The Builders Daily and many more outlets, the America at Home Study Concept Home was built based on 7,000 nationally representative respondent's answers to a survey. Questions in the April 2020 survey centered on what home meant to the respondent, what they believe is missing from their current home, and what wellness area is most important to them. The Concept Home won a Gold Nugget Award in 2021 for Best Flexible Floor Plan, "with judges recognizing the home as an outstanding example of what happens when the customers' needs drive design" (America at Home, n.d.).

I came across this Concept Home when reading an op-ed in The New York Times. What started as a casual reading of the news turned into inspiration and direction for my research. The author of the op-ed, Dr. Tressi McMillan Cottom, introduces us to what she calls the Covid Concept home through critiques of the way the three women builders promoted their model home as "feminist and empowering" (McMillan Cottom,

2021). She goes on to describe a small office off of the kitchen that has decorative wallpaper, "with the assumption that this office will be the mother's work space" (McMillan Cottom, 2021). The critique is that the spaces in the model home keep women "tethered to the kitchen while also allowing her the flexibility to participate in the paid labor market from her Zoom room". Additionally, Dr. McMillan Cottom describes "a hidden room upstairs in the master bedroom that was obviously designed to be a 'mom room', where mothers can hide from their spouses and their children" (McMillan Cottom, 2021). She acknowledges that some women she spoke with at the tour of the model home found this "escape room" to be a welcome addition. But, she points out that this room does not solve the larger societal issues of motherhood. She writes that one of her friends described the room as "akin to building a bubble bath to solve the social structural problem of gendered labor and expectations" McMillan Cottom, 2021).

Reading this article and doing more research on the America at Home Study Concept Home stirred my curiosity about other ways the spaces of the home might contribute to what Dr. McMillan Cottom calls "the gendered division of labor built into an idea of modern design." She argues that "the problems posed by Covid can't really be solved at the level of the household" (McMillan Cottom, 2021). As a feminist geographer, however, I wondered whether there are ways that our daily experiences in the built environment, particularly at the level of the household, can contribute to this societal gendered imbalance? And, if so, can we change our behaviors at this level to make our day-to-day lives a bit more equal?

With this in mind, I searched for couples where both partners worked from home to interview for my research. I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do couples who work from home negotiate space in the home?
2. Does working from home reproduce or reinforce traditional gender roles among couples who work from home?

My research contributes to the expanding literature on space and gender in the home, particularly that of Cath Sullivan and Suzan Lewis (2001). My goal with this research was to understand the lived experiences of couples who work from home through a critical lens of gender inequality. Through qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with ten individuals, comprising five couples, I learned the ways that couples negotiated space in the home which brought to light some inequalities in the outcomes of these negotiations. Additionally, I found that even amongst progressive-identifying couples, traditional gender roles were being created and maintained through cognitive labor and reinforced socialization.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

Feminist Geographies of Home

The subject of home has not always been a popular research topic for geographers. Mona Domosh speculates that it is the intimate and meaning-filled nature of homes that have kept researchers from this important topic (Domosh 1998). Regardless, it wasn't until the 1990's and early 2000's that a surge in interest of the home as a subject of research resulted in articles, journals, and books dedicated to understanding the geography of home (Blunt and Dowling 2022). Researchers looked critically at the history of home (Domosh and Seager 2001) in order to understand the "complex and multi-layered geographical concept" (Blunt and Dowling 2022). Home has traditionally been understood by society as a haven, "a metaphor for experiences of joy and protection" (Brickell 2012). However, at the turn of the 21st century social scientists began to challenge this notion and form a more critical understanding of the home.

Feminists in geography (as well as other disciplines) have traditionally been interested in gendered aspects of the home (Hanson and Pratt 1995; Johnston and Valentine 1995; Ahrentzen 1997; Sullivan and Lewis 2001; Domosh and Seager 2001; Blunt and Dowling 2022). The association of women to the home is perhaps viewed as a natural one, since it has been the norm from at least the 18th century (Domosh and Seager 2001; Blunt and Dowling 2022). The increasing separation of work from home that occurred during the Industrial Revolution led to what researchers refer to as the distinction between the public and the private sector (Domosh and Seager 2001; Blunt and Dowling 2022). The private sector is that of the home, where women are thought to

be safe and, in which, they can practice their supposed natural inclinations of the domestic life. The public sphere is, essentially, everything else. Men ruled the streets and created male-only spaces, like pubs and coffee shops, to go alongside their places of work in the city. Women, who may have been part of this public sphere, were considered "street walkers", simply because they dared to walk along the public street (Domosh and Seager 2001). There have always been women working for pay outside of their homes. Many of them, especially women of color, were relegated to other women's home service, such as housekeepers, cooks and nannies. It was the threat of white women entering the public sector workforce, increasingly throughout the 20th century, that led to efforts to keep women tied to their gender role in the home. Efforts to maintain this separation were (and still are) found in marketing campaigns of housekeeping magazines, the physical and social isolation that came with the suburban ideal of the 1950's, and the continued lack of public care infrastructure that enables women to release themselves of domestic duties (Kern 2019). Now women make up almost half of the workforce in America. But, as Domosh and Seager (2001) point out, this did not release women from their domestic duties or traditional gender role identities tied to the home.

Gillian Rose argues that researching women's everyday lives in gendered spaces, whether in the public or private sphere, is of great importance. Women's daily mobilities, including the "seemingly banal and trivial events of everyday, are bound into the power structures which limit and confine women" (Rose 1993). Rose (1993) points out that the experiences of women were left out of humanist studies of the home, which were primarily done by and about men, and the notion of "home as an essential grounding of human identity is masculinist" (Blunt and Dowling 2022). Feminist researchers

responded by interrogating the ways patriarchy and capitalism worked together to oppress women in the home through isolation, violence, and submissive obligations, among others (Domosh and Seager 2001; Blunt and Dowling 2022).

There are other power structures apart from patriarchy and capitalism at play among women's experiences in the home. The narrative of white, middle- and upper-class women is generally the dominant one in any feminist literature, and the literature of the home is no exception (Blunt and Dowling 2022). While focus on the oppression of women in the home was true for some, it left out many voices, particularly women of color. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) and bell hooks (1991) critique the notion that home is necessarily a place of persecution for women (Blunt and Dowling 2022). hooks (1991) writes of the home as a "site of resistance…where we [all black people] could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world." Therefore, in order to understand the complexity of home as both a site of resistance and oppression, geographers Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (2022) developed the concept of 'critical geographies of home' and proposed that researchers understand the "complex and politicized interplay of home and identity over space and time." Feminist methodology seeks to document the lived experiences of individuals, understanding that there is great complexity and nuance even among specific people. For feminist geographers, studying the home means we "recognize the fluidity of home as a concept, metaphor, and lived experience" (Blunt and Dowling 2022).

Working from Home

Feminist researchers have critiqued the aforementioned dichotomy of public and private spheres (Davidoff and Hall 2002; Blunt and Dowling 2022). They claim that this binary perpetuates the idea that domestic labor is not considered work, and that the two are not interdependent (Markusen 1980; Massey 1994; Domosh and Seager 2001; Blunt and Dowling 2022). Yet, in reality, a capitalist society relies on the unpaid labor of (traditionally) women in the home (Domosh and Seager 2001; Blunt and Dowling 2022). Geographer Richard Peet describes the way capitalism needs this "socially necessary labor" because it "enables necessities to be consumed in appropriate forms, provides means of subsistence for dependents, and ensures generational replacement" (Peet, 1998) all without wage compensation. Working from home may be seen as blurring these public/private lines. Sociologists Stephen Edgell and Edward Granter describe this type of paid work as "home-located work", and point out that it "can and does vary in terms of time (permanent/temporary and/or full/part-time) and employment status (employer, self-employed, or employee)" (2020).

Home-located work has been well documented, particularly starting in the 19th century, when advocates for social reform, like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hines, exposed the "misery of domestic industrial production" (Domosh and Seager 2001). Typical home-located workers at that time were women in the textile industry (Domosh and Seager 2001; Massey 1994). Due to efforts by labor organizers, conditions have since improved for most workers, and the work that home-located workers perform has broadened significantly. At the end of the 20th century, working from home became a growing trend, due to computer and technology capabilities (Bulos and Chaker 1995; Sullivan and Lewis

2001). Now, more than a third of U.S. adults have experienced working from home, also referred to as teleworking or remote work, due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Marshall, Burd, and Burrows 2021). Research on working from home has ramped up because of this societal shift to remote work, and much of it focuses on the gendered differences of lived experiences of those who work from home. (Boncori 2020; Hennekam and Shymko 2020; Rubin et al. 2020; Bowlby and Jupp 2021; Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2021; Waismel-Manor, Wasserman, and Shamir-Balderman 2021).

Prior to pandemic-related research on working from home, Sullivan and Lewis (2001) articulated three models of thinking that feminist researchers generally fall into, in relationship to their understanding of the implications of working from home on women and gender relations. The first model is the "new opportunities for flexibility model" (Huws 1996; Sullivan and Lewis 2001). This model values the flexibility that working from home brings to most workers, especially women (Huws 1996; Sullivan and Lewis 2001). Researchers within this model envision working from home as breaking down gender roles, particularly at home, and giving greater access to opportunities at work for women (Silver 1993; Sullivan and Lewis 2001).

The second model is "the exploitation model" (Sullivan and Lewis 2001). This model highlights the ways working from home leads to further exploitation of women. Working from home exposes women to responsibilities of both paid work and domestic duties in one space, often simultaneously (Haddon and Silverstone 1993; Sullivan and Lewis 2001). Feminist researchers argue that working from home "serves to consolidate patriarchal control of women" (Domosh and Seager 2001) as well as leading to greater

opportunities for exploitation by employers in a capitalist society (Silver 1993; Domosh and Seager 2001; Sullivan and Lewis 2001).

The third model suggests that working from home does offer flexibility to women, while simultaneously "reproducing gender inequalities" in the home and at work. Doris Ruth Eikhof (2012) describes this as a double-edged sword: flexibility from working from home allows for greater gender equality and opportunities for women at work, but it has 'hidden gender consequences' that keep women from these very opportunities. Blunt and Dowling (2022) articulate a "politicized understanding of home" where one recognizes power structures as well as forces resisting those power structures "embedded in ideas and processes of home", in which working from home is included. This third model is proposed by Sullivan and Lewis in their 2001 paper, and includes an indication that more research must be conducted in order to develop this model. An expansion of the understanding of how working from home affects women will undoubtedly come to light as the number of people working from home grows, expedited by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Domestic Duties and Gender Roles During a Pandemic

Literature on working from home during COVID-19 has largely centered around domestic responsibility, and the disproportionate amount of work that falls to women. These responsibilities include, but are not limited to, homeschooling, childcare, cleaning, and cooking; all increased due to state or local lockdown mandates, school closures, daycare closures, isolation practices, and public health initiatives (Boncori 2020; Hennekam and Shymko 2020; Rubin et al. 2020; Bowlby and Jupp 2021; Cassino and

Besen-Cassino 2021; Waismel-Manor, Wasserman, and Shamir-Balderman 2021). Ilaria Boncori (2020) describes this time, managing all the above duties, as 'the never-ending shift'. This phrase is a modern update to Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung's classic study of 'the second shift', which indicates that after completing their first shift outside of the home at work, working women must come home to their second shift of unpaid labor at home (Hochschild and Machung 1989).

There have been gains in men's contribution to domestic responsibilities, with men sharing more of the load than 30 years ago (Brenan 2020). However, study after study show that women carry the burden of household and childcare duties, regardless of distribution of income among the couple (Boncori 2020; Brenan 2020; Hennekam and Shymko 2020; Bowlby and Jupp 2021; Calarco et al. 2021; Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2021). Research attributes some of this lack of household work by men on gender roles and performance (Hennekam and Shykmo 2020; Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2021). Under stress, and particularly economic stress, some men actually perform less domestic work (Mannino and Deutsch 2007; Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2021). This can be due to perceived threats to masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2021) or can be a coping strategy to stress, by clinging to a known identity (Hennekam and Shymko 2020). Another finding is that, during times of uncertainty, like that from COVID-19, negotiations of the delegation of duties can be an added stress to the household. When this occurs, it is likely that the woman will take on more duties by default, given the gender role and supposed 'natural' inclination set up by societal structures (Calarco et al. 2021). Despite this overwhelming burden on women, Hennekam and Shymko (2020) do believe there is hope for a more equitable distribution of domestic

work. A portion of their respondents reported being more aware of the inequities at home, using the 'domestic confinement' of the COVID-19 pandemic to intentionally dismantle those gender roles (Hennekam and Shymko 2020).

Spatial Aspects of Working from Home

It is important to understand the spatial element of working from home. The merging of two spaces into one can be helpful but can also pose problems. Wapshott and Mallett (2011) use the term 'mimesis' to describe the physical bringing in of work equipment (desk, computer, camera, etc) to the home. This re-creation of the physical office space can cause displacement of meaning and values for both the worker and their co-residents (Wapshott and Mallett 2011). Sullivan (2000) found "the psychological boundary between work and family […] to be influenced, partly by physical boundaries." Negotiating these physical boundaries creates potential conflict between worker and co-resident, as well as between worker and her work. Waismel-Manor, Wasserman, and Shamir-Balderman (2021) found this to be true twenty years after Sullivan's study. They examined the gendered aspects of workspace at home during COVID-19 and found that men who worked from home were able to more easily separate their paid work from their household work roles than women who worked from home. This is in large part to the men "securing a separate professional space within the home" whereas women's workspace was more fluid and unfixed (Waismel-Manor, Wasserman, and Shamir-Balderman 2021). There is little current research regarding the spatial aspects of working from home and its effects on gender and family. More research is needed to replicate Waismel-Manor, Wasserman, and Shamir-Balderman's (2021) work, which was limited

to a small group of 15 couples in Israel, to assess whether there are gendered aspects in the spatial negotiation of the home in other populations. Additionally, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is almost certainly driving further shifts in how we experience and navigate space at home. Efforts to continue this type of research outside of Israel will add to the literature of gender and work in the home and will help our society reimagine what paid and unpaid labor looks like in our most intimate spaces.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Methodological Approach

My research stems from my work as a feminist geographer. It is not just the mere fact that I identify as a woman that makes this research feminist in nature. Nor is it merely the fact that I feature women as my subjects in this research. Rather, it includes the "relationships among people involved in the research process, the actual conduct of the research…and the opening up of the research process as embodied, messy and complex" (Sharp, 2005). As a feminist geographer, I recognize that a person's lived experience is a form of knowledge that should be studied in tandem with other more accepted mainstream data, especially in the academy. It is with this understanding that I chose to do a small-scale in-depth research project where I had the privilege of sitting with individuals one-on-one. I do not take the responsibility of sharing their stories in the context of my research lightly, and I hope I've done them the justice they deserve.

Participant Recruitment

Interview participants were recruited primarily through word-of-mouth networking. Two couples were found through one of my family member's school network. Two couples were found through my research community. The fourth couple is a friend of a friend. I interviewed a total of five couples in ten individual interview sessions. Due to the short time frame and required narrow scope of a master's thesis, I

limited my participants to heterosexual couples who live together. Participants were eligible if they met the following criteria:

1. Worked from home at least two days a week, or approximately 40% of their total work week, and
2. had a partner willing to be interviewed who works from the same home location for the same (or more) total amount of time, and
3. (preferably) at least one partner began working from home regularly after March 2020.

The five couples live in different metropolitan areas of the country: two in the Southwest, one in the South Central, and two in the Midwest. All couples claimed middle class status, progressive or somewhat progressive socio-political beliefs, and all identified as white, with the addition of one participant calling themself white Hispanic. Two couples had children, four couples owned their own home, and one couple had recently moved in with their parents. Figure 1 below shows the couples, with individual ages, indicator of which partner earned more yearly income, and career or industry. Names and other identifying features have been changed to protect the privacy of these individuals.

Name	Age	Higher Earner*	Career	Co-residents
Alice	30		Healthcare	1 child
Arnold	32	$$	IT	1 child
Brenda	27	$$	Academic Staff	3 housemates
Bart	27		Academic Staff	3 housemates
Chloe	33	$$	Consultant	
Carlos	34		Consultant	
Daphne	30	$$	Designer	
Donald	34		Artist	
Evie	39	$$	Academic Faculty	2 children
Edgar	44		Tax Specialist	2 children

Figure 1: Demographics of individuals in the study. *$$ indicates which partner earned more money.

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews of each participant. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and recorded with the participant's consent. I asked questions related to divisions of space in the home, daily mobilities inside the home, household and childcare duties, negotiation practices of determining these divisions, and the feelings of satisfaction, regret or conflict about these issues. Participants were encouraged to think about their experiences in the spaces they worked in at home as well as how they interacted with their partners while both working from home. A detailed list of questions is attached as Appendix A.

Post-Interview Analysis

After each interview, I took detailed notes of my initial observations. As the interviews continued, I adjusted my questions based on patterns I had been seeing, or curiosities that occurred with other participants. I utilized Otter AI software to transcribe each interview. As I transcribed, I made additional detailed notes about themes forming, patterns and further observations. I also had weekly meetings with my advisor, where we spent time talking through themes and patterns, and I took detailed notes there as well. I uploaded the transcripts into the qualitative coding software, NVIVO. I created codes around the themes I had found during transcription and discussions and coded each transcribed interview for those themes. Codes were then reorganized into broader themes that were linked to the academic research and theories.

Bias

I would like to acknowledge that the creation of the methodology is a prime location for bias to enter the research process. As someone who works from home with her partner, I had pre-conceived ideas of what working from home might look like for these couples. I used my experience to create interview questions, and this, by nature, leads an interview down a particular path that the participant might not have chosen for themselves. As far as my analysis, I am clearly looking for gender disparities, given my focus of study, and so may miss or choose to forego looking at other important findings from these interviews. There is rich data in these interviews. Given more time, I may have asked the participants to look over some of the themes I observed or patterns I'd seen, to gather whether they viewed it as an accurate representation of their experience.

Chapter Four

Findings and Analysis

Trading Spaces

The most surprising finding that came from the interviews was that four of the five couples had moved within the last two years to accommodate their work-from-home lifestyles. Three couples bought their own home and one moved into a family member's larger house. Brenda and Bart, who moved in with Bart's parents, spoke disparagingly about working from home in their previous residence — a one-bedroom apartment. They moved to have more space as well as save money to buy their own home. Brenda, in particular, was grateful to have moved, despite living with three additional adults. Alice and Arnold felt as if they were outgrowing their three-bedroom home close to town. They hope to have more children and knew they needed more space, if they were to continue to work from home and build a family. They acknowledged that the one drawback to their new home was that it was much further from their family and care network, meaning childcare for their young child was an issue. However, because they worked from home, they had the flexibility (and now additional space) for Arnold to be the main caretaker while their child was still at home.

Daphne and Donald bought a new home to expand their business, which boomed during the pandemic. They were very intentional about buying a home that suited their business needs, with Daphne claiming that their personal "day to day life probably came last on our list" of priorities for home purchasing. Chloe and Carlos purchased their home after a few years of bouncing from family homes to student apartments, and even some

time on the road in their van. Carlos stated that accommodating their work-from-home lifestyle was a huge priority when looking for homes to purchase. Chloe did not fully agree with that sentiment but did acknowledge that it was certainly something they talked about, especially as it related to having a separate room with a door that she could work in. Having "two distinct working places" was a priority, but she felt they would have been able to negotiate space in almost any home.

Is this finding of home-buying simply a correlation with the standard American timeline of home-buying? This could easily be argued for, as these are all millennial couples looking to start families, grow businesses, or save for larger homes. What was unexpected for my research, however, is that the decision to move to a larger home is where the initial negotiating of space while working from home for these couples occurred. The recognition that there simply was not enough space to work from home lined up with the ability to relocate for four of these couples. The unique circumstances brought on by the real estate market during the pandemic (i.e., record-low interest rates) was also at play for the three couples who purchased a home. Both Donald and Bart couldn't believe their luck in how much they were able to sell their old house for. The discussions around the decision to move seemed to be the most intentional ones that the couples were having in regards to how to negotiate space while working from home. It is important to note that negotiating an empty space for the first time in a new home can be much easier than rearranging or re-negotiating spaces that already have an established role. Evie and Edgar's difficult experience of negotiating space in a home that they had occupied for several years before both began to work from home shows this to be true. This will be discussed in detail later.

A "Natural" Evolution of Space

The interviews suggest that, once moved into their new homes, these couples did not have focused, intentional discussions regarding the space in their home. Many of them do not remember ever having conversations around the allocation of space used for paid work in their homes. Rather, the couples made practical and pragmatic choices that were either done by default or with quick, uncontested remarks about working space. Carlos summed it up perfectly by saying, "It just makes sense" that Chloe had one space and he was in the other. Decisions that were made centered around amount of space, work styles, workplace requirements and environmental needs. Whether these default decisions occurred out of a deep understanding of the other partner's needs, a lack of understanding of how crucial space can be to one's daily life, or something else entirely requires further research. Additionally, it is important to remember the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in this study. Making decisions about space in the home was not, appropriately, at the top of priority lists for most people when the pandemic hit. Decisions were made quickly and in the shadow of the chaos brought on by unprecedented circumstances. What this study makes clear, however, is that some couples did not revisit their space allocation decisions once their new way of working from home took hold. This lack of critical reflection allows for the status quo to remain in place, regardless of how well it serves the needs of the individual. Default decisions can lend themselves to further unhelpful and, even, inequitable patterns. This became clear in several of the participants' attitudes towards the spaces they occupied, particularly some women who felt they were relegated to the smaller or less professional rooms.

For Edgar and Evie, the couple that did not purchase a home in the last year, working from home was not a priority when they purchased their current home about five years ago. At that time, Evie had a hybrid work schedule while Edgar was initially unemployed, but then worked full time away from the home at his employer's office. There was ample room in their five-bedroom home for Evie to use when she was working from home. In fact, they set up one of their rooms as an office space for Evie, because it just made sense to them:

> Okay, when we first moved into our house, there was an office, or this front room in our house that's off from the living room and dining room, at the front of the house. So, it's like off your left when you enter into the house. So, it's just this room that sits there. And, you know, I guess some people might turn it into like a sitting room or with a piano; maybe I could see that happening, right? That might be an obvious kind of use for the space, but not for us. And, so, I was like, 'Oh, this makes perfect sense for an office.' And so we'd set up an office, and I fully intended for it to be my office, my work from home office.

And then the pandemic happened. Edgar's out-of-home office was shut down and he was required to work from home while Evie moved to fully remote as well. However, Evie did not remain in her home office space that was originally intended for her. Edgar set up his workspace in the home office, while Evie was "somehow relegated to the kitchen counter." When asked how that decision was made, Evie initially stated that she did not remember ever having a conversation about who got the home office:

> I don't think we ever talked about it, right, it's just like it evolved that way. We didn't have a decision, I'm like, okay, this is gonna be it. It was like he had been

> told he was going to work from home and so that is what happened when it [the pandemic] first broke.

When pressed further about why Evie felt like she relinquished the home office to Edgar rather than staying in there herself, she spoke about the lack of ownership she was able to claim on the home office:

> So it's never like, this felt like, you know, I had fully owned the space. We had a desk, we had a monitor setup in there. And that, you know, but I never used the monitors to work on my laptop. So, for me, it was just like a desk and a chair, right, that I would use sometimes when I was working from home. But it wasn't like I had, you know, tons of books in there, or I hadn’t, you know, I hadn't invested in it as like my office space.

As the pandemic continued, Evie says she “grew conscience of what had happened at some point” and became very frustrated that “somehow in this situation [her] work priorities got downgraded. [Her] workspace was the one that got moved to the freakin kitchen counter, which is awful.” She did, however, concede that it was perhaps her physical needs that led her to not pursuing a re-examination of their spatial arrangement with Edgar. Additionally, she spoke of Edgar’s workspace requirements as a reason for him claiming the home office:

> And it might have been slight preferences of like, you know, sometimes I was more willing to work from work from my bed because of my, like, lower back issues. And when I was pregnant, too, for sure, I know, I was doing a lot of working from the bed because it was more comfortable in my back than sitting in a chair. It could have been that, like, he really liked working at a desk in a chair.

> For me, it was like, I would prefer to only do that a quarter of the time or a third of the time. And I was willing to lay in bed and work because it was more physically comfortable for me than him. That might have been how it evolved. Sure, like that what his preferred setup was sitting in a chair and working on a desk, and he needed a monitor, needed dual monitors for his job, to really be effective, to be efficient. And so that might have been how it is, that's why I didn't fight it, right? That's why I was like, okay, well, this makes sense.

For Edgar, this practical need for a physical workplace was the rationale behind the decision for him to have the home office:

> Um, so I would say primarily, for me, that was a matter of comfort, because my job is much more like an office desk job. So, I need to be sort of at my computer and on, more or less from eight to five every day. And so like, there's no other room in the house that's really set up for like sitting upright in a chair with proper posture, you know, like you would have in a stereotypical office. I also strongly dislike working while lying on a bed or even sitting on a soft sofa. And Evie frequently chooses to do those things anyway. So, there wasn't, you know, and honestly, I don't remember any conversation. I don't remember explicit words about like, well, this will be my working space. It was more just there was no fight over that territory. So, I just plugged in my laptop, I bought a monitor. Yeah. And there was never really much contest for it.

For this couple, the only participants in this study to not have purchased or moved to a new home in the last year, there was no discussion or negotiations in regard to home office spaces. This seems to have been a natural "evolution", as Evie claims, something

that both partners instinctively knew based on their observations of each other's working styles. However, Evie seemed to carry some resentment of not having her own workspace and feeling "relegated to the kitchen" or her bedroom, despite the physical and environmental comforts each provided. As an observation, it seems clear that the issue was less that Evie had to give up the front office, a space that never really worked for her, and more that Evie and Edgar never created a dedicated space that worked for her. The office can be seen as a symbol of power and the manifestation of capitalism and patriarchy in the home. Although Evie did not articulate it clearly, her embodied experience of being kicked out of the office felt like a lack of recognition for her higher-earning work and status in the home.

Spatial Negotiations and Decision Making

Pragmatism and practicality were key components in all the couples' decision-making processes when determining who should work in what space in the home. Several individuals had workplace requirements which forced them to choose a particular room in the house. For Arnold, it was a simple choice of an internet hookup location that led to Arnold getting the larger room in the house. Alice wasn't fully convinced by this, however:

> His office is a lot bigger than mine. Out of the bedrooms, like the three spare bedrooms, his office is the biggest bedroom. Um, I think he tricked me. So, you know, I have to have like, my computer for work directly connected to the internet. I can't use Wi-Fi. And so he was like, that's the only room they can do it

> in. But why wouldn’t they be able to…whatever doesn't matter. He doesn't need to keep it that long, hopefully.

Privacy concerns due to the types of paid work people perform were also a major consideration for many couples. For Alice and Arnold, it was the deciding factor in who would carry the most responsibility for their child as well. Alice required a fully closed room, while Arnold had flexibility to be in an open space, which happened to be the entire downstairs floor with their toddler. When asked how they made that decision, Arnold said very matter-of-factly:

> It’s job responsibilities. We both kind of work in healthcare, but I do less work with patient information nowadays, and she works primarily with patient information. So, she has to have a closed locked door for most of the work that she's doing. And I don't so that was kind of just how it was decided.

Similarly, Chloe participates in much more face-to-face (virtual) time with her and Carlos’ clients, and so occupies the only closed-door office space in their home (for now, since they are remodeling the basement).

For Brenda and Bart, who both need privacy for their regular virtual meetings during the workday, space negotiation discussions occurred not with each other, but with Bart’s parents. When they first moved in, Brenda was the only one working fully remote, and, so, it was an easy decision for her to take the extra unoccupied room as her office. Bart did set up a little desk in their bedroom for schoolwork, but, when he started a full-time remote job, he quickly saw an issue in this set up: his and Brenda’s schedules. Bart needed another closed-door space to set up his office space in, because he and Brenda worked at different times and occupying the bedroom was not working for their lifestyle.

In addition to workplace requirements, work styles and environmental needs played a role in the couples' spatial decision making. As stated before, Edgar and Evie had different environmental needs: Evie preferred to not sit at a desk all day, and Edgar liked to have his own dedicated desk and chair. Similarly, both Carlos and Arnold spoke of enjoying being able to walk around and even said they needed the stimulation of new environments to be successful in their work. Carlos said:

> I'm kind of scattered and I'm hyperactive as well. So having the ability to like find what space works for me, has been really nice. And I think that also plays into why I don't sit in the office is I don't, I don't want to maintain that space all the time, if it's not gonna be the space I work in most. And I find myself bouncing around a lot more than Chloe does.

Contrasting with Carlos, his partner Chloe spoke of needing the least amount of distractions and outside stimuli as possible: "I'm someone who needs complete silence, I have to kind of like, shelter myself in place to really focus in and do the work, I do my best work in that kind of environment." Carlos says it was an easy decision to let Chloe have the office while he worked down in the basement, which is currently under construction: "I want her to have the nice office space and the space that's finished and is calming in a way rather than chaotic and in a basement." Likewise, when Daphne needed to work on the administrative side of her art/décor business, it was imperative that she step away from the distractions of the art studio in their home where Donald and their employee work out of: "The only reason I even leave this space is just for like some silence so that I can make sure I don't start like typing what someone said in the middle of my email or what have you."

Several individuals talked about needing auditory stimulation. Because Brenda had her own closed-door office space, she was able to turn movies on in the background without worrying about her other housemates.

> But for me, I actually hate the silence. And it will distract me in the sense of like, I'm bored. Let me go on my phone and I'm just gonna, like swipe for a while. So, what I do to help with that is I actually will have TV going on my phone. And it's usually like a show that I've seen before, so it's not like it's super, super attention grabbing or like super intense. And if I have a conversation with a student, then I'll just like pause the show real quick and have that conversation. But it keeps me productive in the sense that it's like, something's going on, I don't need to be distracted right now.

Similarly, Carlos credited boredom for the reason he moves around in the house so much and describes the grounding sense he gets from listening to his record player:

> Yeah, I think boredom. If I'm just bored with what I'm doing, I'll, I'll go somewhere else. Or if I'm looking for something, that would kind of be like a mental stimulant, like that as well, like kind of helped me get out of a writing funk. I'll move like, that's one of those things, I'll go up into the record room, and I'll play records that's kind of getting engaged thing where I can listen to music, which I find helpful. But also there's this activity that's kind of going and keeping a metronome. Like, I have to flip the record or change the record. And so it's this metronome of like, I can work and then the, there's these breakups in the activity, which, if I'm doing the same thing over and over, I find myself getting stuck a lot, especially in tasks I hate which writing is not one of my favorites. But it it's one

> of the tools I found that helps me get those things done much quicker and be more effective while I'm doing it.

This ability to accommodate individual working styles and environmental needs and preferences was mentioned as one of the biggest perks to working from home. Things like lighting, sound, scent, paint color, and room temperature were things these individuals could control and made working from home more of a positive experience.

The Party Host

Participants were asked what percentage of the housework they and their partners each performed. Most of the couples agreed with their partner's estimates, though the women tended to be more generous to their male counterparts. The answers varied from 80/20 (with the woman doing more) to an even 50/50 split. This question proved to be uncomfortable for Evie. She did not want to think about the disparity of responsibilities for fear of being resentful towards Edgar. She also found it hard to distinguish between paid and unpaid labor she performed in and out of her home:

> And the way that the reality of my life is there's no, there's no division [between paid and unpaid work], right? It's all one big giant fucking to do list. It all has to get done. It's getting the fuck done mode. So, every day I think about what has to happen. I don't think about is it work? Is it personal? I just think this is the stuff I have to get done. And I do my best to do it.

Regardless of the perceived amount of sharing of chores in all five couples, the women expressed the greatest amount of time and energy thinking and delegating the

management of the house and the unpaid labor performed there. Both male and female partners confirmed this. Carlos said of Chloe:

> We have a shared note on our phones or devices, and it's called the manager list. I, I often will have, I have to check it regularly. Because throughout the day, she'll like add things to it. It's like, Oh, I've thought of this thing that should be done, or I would like to have done or is pressing. And so I, I know she's thinking about those things throughout the day.

Alice claims that she and Arnold fairly evenly split the performing of unpaid housework, but she goes on to talk about how she needs to tell Arnold to do that very housework:

> I would say it's pretty evenly split, I probably do a little bit more just because like, he'll, Arnold will, do housework that he knows needs to be done, if I ask him to do it. And then like, if I don't ask him, he won't, like, it doesn't occur to him to do things. So, like, he knows that it's his responsibility to like, do laundry, or change the cat litter, and when he's supposed to do those things, but then, like, general tidying up throughout the day, he'll just ignore that. So, like, when I come downstairs, as I'm making my way downstairs into the like, kitchen or wherever. I'll just pick up things and put things back. A tiny bit more me but I think we've pretty evenly split it.

Similarly, Brenda talks about having to tell Bart when and what to clean: "I'll say because I notice [the mess] more, I [clean] more. But they're not bad at helping out. It's just I have to be the one to, like, point it out to them." She has the added pressure of living with her mother-, father-, and sister in-law, and has to navigate involving her sister-in-law in the cleaning management conversations:

> Bart does more than Bart's sister, yeah. And that's hard, because it's like, I'm not her mom. Like, I can't tell her like, to clean. But Bart's my husband, so I can say like, 'Hey, honey, can you help me?' versus like with Bart's sister, it's like, you're doing your own thing and that kind of stuff.

Most of the women expressed having a lower tolerance for messiness, often framing it as a personality trait or character quirk. Daphne said:

> But I think that is, something that I typically am the one, I think I probably like want things to be cleaner than what he does. And so I typically start to take that on. And then anytime he sees me doing that, he'll be like, alright, I'll pitch in.

Chloe spoke of enjoying sweeping because of her grandmother:

> I grew up in a house with a grandma who swept our floors, no joke, 20 times a day. So, I feel connected to her when I sweep because that's what I saw growing up and it feels comfortable to me.

These women seem to have internalized the socialized notion of women being the caretakers of the home to the point where it is a part of their identity. Some male partners confirmed this by observing that they do not clean as much as their partners because they simply don't have the expectations that the women have as far as cleanliness goes. Bart said of Brenda, "She very much needs a clean house to feel sane, so she oftentimes just does it [the cleaning]." He goes on to describe how his messy childhood affects how he views cleanliness in the home, which is quite different from Brenda:

> So, she'll do the dishes 99% of the time. And she just notices messes. I grew up with four boys in the house and a messy sister. So, messes were nothing, are nothing new to me. And I don't see it as bad as she does. She's like, the

> bathroom’s a mess. And I'm like, why? And she's like, there's water on the sink. I'm like, there's always water on the sink. It's a sink. So, you know, I would say she does 80% [of the housework] because she sees the messes more and because she cares about the mess more, so she does it.

It's clear that the gendered socialization of both Bart and Brenda has affected the inequality in the distribution of housework between them. This was not the only instance among couples who were interviewed.

Many women spoke of cleaning the house during their breaks. While most said this did not impede their paid work, Daphne felt guilt about maintaining a clean home during what she allotted as paid work hours:

> But I do catch myself a lot of times when I should ideally, or ideally, I would be working. I'll be like, ‘Oh, the house is a mess.’ I'm gonna go pick up the kitchen or what have you so that I'm not embarrassed by the mess if someone sees it, and when really that is time that's allotted for work.

Interestingly, Daphne and Donald have one or two employees come almost every day to work at their home studio. The employees use the whole house, particularly the kitchen and bathroom, during the day. Daphne expressed pressure to make sure her house was pristine and her employees comfortable, which ended up being a major problem for her:

> I was kind of taking on the mindset of like a party host when people are coming to work in my home. And I was like, ‘Do you need anything? Are you having a good time?’ This and that, and that was something that I like, I started talking through in therapy, and my therapist was like, it's not your job to like, entertain your

> employees, like it's your job to run a business. And I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, I've been taking on the role of party host, not person who's running a business and needs to keep running a business so everyone can get paid, and, and so forth.'

Daphne credits her upbringing and personality for this pressure to be a party host, but also acknowledges that this is amplified due to her business being in her home. This is in stark contrast to Donald, who did not express this burden of hospitality. He, in fact, talked about how having employees in the house is a good thing because it forces him to be cleaner: "It's like almost a good thing that they're going through those spaces because then I'm like, I should clean almost every day, which is good. Yeah, keep all the dishes picked up in the kitchen and things like that." It was unclear whether Donald's newly self-imposed pressure to clean came from Daphne or somewhere else. Wherever it came from, Donald now feels the pressure that Daphne has been socialized to feel her whole life.

Edgar was the one exception to the rule of managing the cleanliness of the home for these five couples. He expressed a great desire to keep his office space clean, while adjusting his standards for the rest of the house, due to the addition of a second child:

> Yeah, you got to like negotiate with reality a little bit. So now it's just like, I just tried to keep the desk, the floor, my peripheral vision, like it's all dusted and vacuumed and organized. Yeah, I can feel like my stress level comes down.

In the month prior to interviewing Edgar, he was able to return to his office building outside of the home. This geographical separation of work and home has made a huge difference for him:

> And so the house might be messier now than when we were both there [full time], because we're not spending as much time in it to clean it. But it makes sense. And it's a lot easier to sort of look at yourself or look at your spouse and be like, we're doing our best even though it's trashed. We'll clean it when we get to it. And you know, and you're going to work, and I'm going to work and that's what adults do. And the kids are both going to school. And that's what kids do. And you know, things feel a lot more normal.

Edgar and Evie's jobs and the amount of time they worked didn't change. They were "doing what adults do" while working from home full time as well. But, for Edgar, being in the same physical space for home life and paid work life created an intense pressure to maintain a clean home. Now that he's back to the out-of-home office and has the separation, that pressure has lifted and he can be okay with a messy home.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Spatial Differences

I began this research with the hopes of exploring couples' spatial decision-making processes. I wanted to compare these couples to those in Waismel-Manor, Wasserman, and Shamir-Balderman's (2021) work, who were shown to have glaring gender disparities when it came to spatial decision making. It turned out that the couples I interviewed generally did not have any major discussions with each other about who gets what space in the home. The most significant discussion they had was one to buy a house or move into a different home, which could accommodate their working from home lifestyle. When there were more focused discussions about specific working space, they were primarily practical and pragmatic decisions based on workplace requirements (internet connections and privacy), working styles (focused sitting at a desk vs. freedom to walk around) and environmental needs (need for minimal distractions or need for outside stimulations).

The in-home paid working places of the individuals in my research show that spatial arrangements were not always necessarily gendered. Decisions about the occupation of space were generally made based on the individual's, both males and females, specific and differing accommodations. However, two women in my study, Alice and Evie, expressed resentment towards their male partners about the spaces that were claimed. This points to Waismel-Manor, Wasserman, and Shamir-Balderman's study in Israel, which "illuminate[s] women's right to workspace in the home as an issue of gender equality"(2021). As stated previously, the research in Israel showed that the

majority of men in their study claimed the closed-door office space, and women were considered “vagrants” in their own home, wandering about in a fluid and unfixed way, leaving them more accessible to the demands of the home. One glaring difference between my study and the one in Israel is the timing. Waismel-Manor, Wasserman and Shamir-Balderman’s study occurred in the height of the pandemic during a forced lockdown. In other words, the participants in Israel did not necessarily choose to be working from home and, therefore, may not have been invested in a future of working from home. The one couple in my study who seemed to share the experiences of the Israeli couples was Evie and Edgar, since Edgar chose to go back to the out-of-home office as soon as he could. Coincidentally, Evie had the most visible resentment of the spatial allocations in the home while they both worked from home. This may suggest that decisions about space that were quickly made and seen as temporary may fall more along gendered lines. In her book, *Feminist City,* feminist geographer Leslie Kern highlights how space can become an agent in reproducing patriarchy (2019). Once a space has an established purpose, like an office in a home, it is hard to change. The creation of the status quo in this space becomes that agent in inequality. This study shows how small, seemingly innocuous decisions have the power to codify future gender relationships.

The four other couples in this study intentionally chose to work from home. This allowed for an investment and ownership of their spaces, with more time and experience to decide which space in the home would work best for both partners in the long run. Both Chloe and Brenda knew they needed a separate, closed-door, professional office space, and their male partners willingly agreed they should have that space. This finding suggests there may be progress in regards to the gendered division of space in the home.

Of note, the two women who were resentful of their male partners space in the home were the only two mothers in the group. Further research should look at the how the presence of children in the home impacts the spatial arrangements of couples who work from home.

Constrained Flexibility in the Home

Nine out of the ten individuals that I interviewed expressed a desire to work from home for the foreseeable future. There were some drawbacks mentioned, but, overall, the feeling was that the positives far outweighed the negatives of working from home. The two most prominent positive aspects among men and women was the amount of time saved and flexibility allowed by working from home. The lack of commute was mentioned multiple times, particularly from those who lived in larger cities. Alice articulated that she no longer had to "waste" an hour at work for lunch. Instead, she used this break time to do housework and spend time with her child. Chloe and Carlos invested their flexibility and time in getting to know neighbors, while sitting on the front porch to work. Edgar and Evie credited working from home for the flexibility to adapt to a newborn baby.

While working from home offers flexibility that is clearly seen as a huge benefit to these workers, the interviews also point to larger notions of imbalance. The experiences of the couples interviewed for this study contribute to the theory proposed by Sullivan and Lewis (2001) that suggests working from home does offer flexibility to women, while simultaneously reproducing gender inequalities in paid and unpaid labor in the home. This study highlights three distinct ways these inequalities show up, through:

cognitive labor performed primarily by women, the embodied and gendered habitus of domestic spaces, and the risk of fixed capital and lack of worker compensation from employers.

Cognitive Labor

Sociologist Allison Daminger describes cognitive labor as the mental effort needed to maintain a household. She explains that this mental load involves four components: "anticipating needs, identifying options for filling them, making decisions, and monitoring progress (2019)". As stated previously, the experiences of the couples in this study seem to support evidence that there is progress in evening out the gendered division of the *doing* of household duties, including childcare. However, both men and women confirmed that the women thought about the chores a substantial amount more than the men. In other words, women were performing unpaid cognitive labor.

Daminger points out that much of this labor is invisible and "can generate conflict within a couple". Additionally, she states that "with no real beginning or end, cognitive work can feel like a conveyor belt without an off button (2019)". Looking back at Evie's experience of her never-ending "get it the fuck done" list, it is clear to see this invisible conveyor belt of mental load at play. Evie spoke of not being able to distinguish paid and unpaid labor whether she was at her campus office or at home:

> If I'm at work [on campus], there's a good chance that there's personal stuff that has to happen. You know, summer camp registration, doctor's appointments, musical instruments [lessons], or to remember to schedule his coding lessons or, you know, with the toddler, it's daycare stuff or it's, you know, if I'm at work,

> there's tons of personal stuff. If I'm at home, I'm answering emails, right in-between eating a meal and changing my toddler's clothes. I'm, you know, it's, there's never, there's no separation. I'm doing both things simultaneously, back and forth all day long.

It is clear that cognitive labor is performed regardless of the laborer's physical location. However, when women perform paid labor in the same space that has historically been the primary space for unpaid labor, there is more visibility and awareness of what needs to get done in the household and more chances to perform one or more of the four components of cognitive labor suggested by Daminger. This was shown to be true by Brenda, who had conversations during her paid work time with her partner and sister-in-law about whose turn it was to clean the bathroom (component two and three: identifying options to fill needs and making decisions). Although Chloe was in a closed-door office space in her home, the unpaid work of her home was so constant in her mind that she needed a shared list to write down all the things running through her head (component one: anticipating needs). Alice had to constantly remind Arnold to do chores, which she did during her breaks (component four: monitoring progress). Working from home heightens the visibility of household needs and, therefore, the amount of cognitive labor performed by women, by blending the geographical spaces of paid and unpaid labor into one.

Habitus

The second way this study shows how working from home contributes to the reproduction of gender inequality is through the gendered embodiment and reinforcement

of socialized roles. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is used to describe the process of internalizing a socially prescribed role that is, in turn, reinforced through actions of that same social role (Peet, 1998). In this study, most of the women claimed that they preferred a cleaner home and could not work or sleep until certain things in the house were cleaned up. This is an internalization of the role society places on women to maintain a suitable domestic space (Domosh and Seager 2001). By expressing these internalized expectations as preferences or desires, the women are performing their social role to their partners and co-residents. This, then reinforces and encourages the male partners to subscribe to the belief that women (or at least their partner) just naturally prefer cleaner spaces. This was made clear when both male and female partners described the woman’s desire for cleanliness in the home like they would a personality trait.

For an explicit example of this, remember that Bart said Brenda “very much needs a clean house to feel sane,” described in the previous chapter. Bart then went on to talk about his upbringing in a home with “four boys in the house and a messy sister”. The use of the word ‘messy’ for his sister but not for the boys of the house assumes the social acceptability of boys to be messy, but not girls. Sociologist Andrea Doucet describes this as “the gendered habitus of ‘growing up as a girl' or ‘growing up as a guy’ [and] is informed by deeply ingrained assumptions about gendered embodiment” (2009). This reproduction and reinforcement is not limited to those who work from home. However, when both partners work from home there is more visibility of the performance of social roles. Further research should look at couples with only one partner working from home for comparison.

Fixed Capital and Lack of Worker Compensation

Finally, working from home reproduces inequality in a way primarily tied to capitalism and affects both men and women. Renowned geographer David Harvey explains the Marxist theory of fixed capital: The built environment, traditionally factories, office buildings, and other public spaces, are a risky investment for capitalists and can "ultimately act as barriers to further accumulation" (Peet, 1998). For example, a company must negotiate whether to "preserve the value of past investments", like staying at a sleek building in downtown, or "destroy those investments to make new room for accumulation", like expanding to a cheaper industrial park setting. When the built environment ownership is displaced to the individual remote worker, the risk of fixed capital is then placed on those who work from home, without compensation from their employers.

Though the couples in this study expressed a few other motivations for moving, like an expanding family, many of the couples moved in order to accommodate the space required for both of them to work from home. None expressed being financially aided by their employers to accomplish this. Similarly, several couples expressed cleaning their house more since spending more time at home. None expressed being compensated for this extra janitorial service. The women, in particular, found it difficult to *not* clean up during their working hours; whereas many of the men were able to compartmentalize their time with no feelings attached. Taking this even further, Daphne expressed guilt for spending what she considered her paid working time to tidy up the kitchen. When reminded that her employees use her kitchen during the day, and asked why she didn't

consider the maintenance of that workspace as part of her paid work, she claimed she had never thought of it that way:

> That's a really good question. Um, that is, I love that question. Yeah, in my mind, it feels separate. But the whole house is used by my employees. So, I don't think it necessarily is separate. And even in the kitchen, we have like a little like, tea set up that our employees are using, like, multiple times a day and things like that. And so, it's definitely very much so part of the workspace and it not being overwhelmed with things is pretty equal to things functioning, so that's what. I'm gonna be thinking on that I like that.

The capitalist labor market is pushing the cost of real estate and owning and managing buildings onto their employees. What used to be a paid job of janitor, property manager, and maintenance worker is now the responsibility of the worker at home. And, since home maintenance is shown to be done largely by women (Brenan, 2021), it is women who are losing out on the wages that employers have historically paid to building caretakers.

These findings suggest that Sullivan and Lewis' call for a model to understand women's constrained flexibility and choice provided by working from home is appropriate. While these interviews show that progress has been made since their 2001 study, particularly around childcare, it is still evident that women are assuming the role of household manager and delegator. Indications hint that patriarchy and capitalism are coming together, even in these progressive homes, to brand women as janitors and building managers of their own home without compensation. Sullivan and Lewis rightfully claim that "home-based work has the potential to create new opportunities for

integrating work and family by blurring the boundaries between these institutions"(2001). Many of the respondents expressed this kind of blurring as a positive flexibility. And yet, the pressure to maintain a clean and functioning home at all hours of the day was felt mostly by the women, and was, not so much an integration of work and family but, a subtle burden.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

The scope of this study is far too small to make generalized statements. However, the experiences of these couples point to broader discussions found in existing literature, particularly that of critical feminist geographers Blunt and Dowling (2022) and Waismel-Manor, Wasserman, and Shamir-Balderman (2021). Firstly, the largest, and most intentional, decision four of the five couples made was to move to a different home with more space. Secondly, the couples were making short-term, uncontested practical decisions about space in their home that lent themselves to reinforce gendered spaces and experiences in the home. Workplace requirements, work styles, and environmental needs were all factors that played into the individual's choice (or forced movement) of space to work in the home. Thirdly, the women in this study performed greater cognitive labor than the men. Reinforcement of this social role was seen through both men and women describing it as a personality trait. Finally, as workers, these individuals were taking on the cost and effort normally held by employers to maintain a workspace, without compensation. Women, in particular, were shown to be the building and janitorial managers of their homes, with the self-described desire and pressure to maintain a clean space.

Further research should consider couples at different stages in life: older couples and more couples with children, in particular. Couples that do not express progressive identities need researched, as well as those living in rural and more varied geographies. Similarly, including couples from different socio-economic strata would increase insights. Studying couples who live in smaller homes or apartments in denser urban areas

and those who do not have the option to move for more space would make for an interesting study of the negotiation of constrained space. This study was limited to heterosexual couples, but existing studies (Brashier, Hughes, Cook, 2013) show that same-sex couples are more intentional communicators, which may create different findings in terms of spatial negotiating and cognitive labor. Finally, individuals with differing racial and ethnic identities must be included in studies of space in the home. Understanding the deeper intersectional constraints placed on workers of color, particularly women, is critical.

In the introduction to the 2nd edition of their seminal work *Home,* updated and published during the pandemic, feminist geographers Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling beautifully summed up the current shift to more time spent at home: "Never has it felt more urgent to understand the material spaces, embodied practices, and spatial imaginaries of home; the ways in which home is experienced and imagined in unequal and contested ways" (2022). There is great possibility in the movement of working from home that has emerged since the pandemic. Opportunities for shared workloads of unpaid labor in the home, investment in neighborhoods and local communities, and access to employment opportunities for individuals that did not previously exist are some examples, not even to mention the transformative power of unclogging our highways of commuters and increasing access to free time. In their book *Out of Office: The Big Problem and Bigger Promise of Working from Home,* Anne Helen Peterson and Charlie Warzel, who, as a couple, have been working from home for years, talk about how "working from home can be a meaningful act of control and resistance," particularly for those whom the office building setting has been "a breeding ground for microaggressions

and toxic loops of hierarchical behavior (2021)". However, like most things in capitalistic societies, there are consequences and implications that are intentionally hidden by those at the top of the systems of power, and the flexibility of working from home, touted by employers and workers alike, is no exception. Revealing the truth of exploitation and imbalances, often to those who are being used themselves, and dismantling the inequality reinforced through these systems and structures should be a priority for researchers and advocates if our society is to continue reaping the benefits of working from home.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview Questions

- **How long** have you been working from home? And **how often** do you work from home?
- What **kind of home** do you live in? How many bedrooms? Square footage?
- **Describe the space** in your home that you work in.
- Describe your **partner's space**. How did you **decide** where each of you work in the home?
- **Step me through a typical day**. Do you move around at all?
- Let's go back to your workspace. If you had to put a name to **the feeling or the mood** in the room, what would you say? Does that change if you use the room for other things? (Maybe compare to other rooms in the house?)
- Do you do anything to **start or end your work time** that helps move you into the next space?
- Do you wear the **same clothes** while you work and when you are finished? Do you wear "work clothes"?
- Do you do **Zoom/Team calls** for work? Do you keep your camera on? Do you have a background up? How do you feel having your home visible to your coworkers?
- Are you **satisfied with the space** you work in? Is there anything you would add or change?
- Moving into some questions about housework. This can be defined however you want it to, but typically includes tidying up the house, vacuuming, cooking, dishes, etc.
- If you could split 100% between you two in regards to who does how much, **what percentage** would you give yourself?
- When do you typically work on **housework**?
- When does your **partner** typically work on housework?

- Are you **satisfied** with that difference?

- How has working from home **impacted** your housework?

- Has working from home impacted your **productivity** or success at work?

- Do you interact with your partner during the day? How do you communicate?

- How has the **experience** of working together from home been? Has it impacted your relationship in any way?

- Do you have any **kids**?
  If yes: How do they fit in to your day?
  Has working from home made it easier or harder to take care of kids?
  What has your experience of being a parent working from home been like?

- Did either of your **parents** work from home growing up? Did either of your parents stay home (not paid labor) growing up?

- What are some **benefits** to working from home?

- What are some **struggles** you've faced while working from home in regards to the space or life inside of your home?

- Will you continue to work from home?

- Okay, now I'm going to ask some semi-rapid fire questions. Some of these may have been answered in our conversation, but I'll ask them more explicitly here.
  - How old are you?
  - What is your gender identity?
  - What race do you identify as?
  - What is your marital status?
  - How long have you and your partner been together?
  - Where are you located in the US?
  - Do you live with anyone else besides your partner?
  - What is the highest education level you've attained?
  - What is your occupation?
  - What is your estimated individual annual income?
  - I'm going to give you a scale to gauge what your socio-political identity is. I'll read the scale and you tell me where you fall on it.
    1- Conservative
    2- Somewhat Conservative
    3- Moderate
    4- Somewhat Progressive
    5- Progressive