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Loads of Work for Communication Scholars: Gender, Parenthood and Burden during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Zusammenfassung

Die Studie nimmt die Arbeitsbedingungen von Kommunikationswissenschaftler:innen in den Blick und untersucht, inwieweit Ungleichheiten hinsichtlich Geschlecht und Elternschaft während der COVID-19-Pandemie zugenommen haben. Dabei wird im Besonderen die Verbindung zwischen der beruflichen Tätigkeit von sich als weiblich identifizierenden Kommunikationswissenschaftlerinnen, der Verteilung häuslicher Betreuungsaufgaben und dem Belastungsempfinden in beruflichen und privaten Bezügen fokussiert. Im Zentrum steht die Frage, welche Belastungen Kommunikationswissenschaftler:innen während der ersten anderthalb Jahre der Pandemie wahrgenommen haben und wie diese sich aus beruflichen Zusammenhängen und den Lebensverhältnissen erklären lassen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Eltern, insbesondere von jüngeren Kindern, eine erhöhte berufliche Stressbelastung verspürten. Überraschenderweise sind die geschlechtsgebundenen Unterschiede nicht so ausgeprägt wie erwartet: Kommunikationswissenschaftlerinnen, die sich als Frauen identifizieren, fühlen sich nicht stärker belastet als ihre sich als Männer identifizierenden Kollegen.

Keywords: COVID-19, Geschlecht, psychische Gesundheit, Ungleichheit, Befragung

Summary

The paper focuses on academic work in communication studies. It discusses whether inequalities related to gender and parenthood have widened during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially concerning the interrelation of women's paid work and the division of caring responsibilities. It discusses how communication scholars perceived the burden during the first year and a half of the pandemic. The results show that parents, especially those of younger children, report feeling the highest level of stress concerning their working life. Surprisingly, gender differences are not as distinct as expected: Communication scholars identifying as female do not perceive themselves as more burdened than their colleagues who identify as male.

Keywords: COVID-19, gender, mental health, inequality, survey

1. Introduction

Nearly three years after the first reports of an outbreak of a novel lung disease in China, the research landscape on the societal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic alone is almost overwhelming. One research focus is the study of inequalities related to gender and parenthood, which have widened due to the pandemic, and the measures implemented to curb them. This is especially pertinent in relation to women's paid work and the division of caring responsibilities (e. g. Berghammer, 2022; Craig, 2020). This article builds on this strand of research with a particular interest in the perspective of communication scholars and their perceived burden during the first year and a half of the pandemic. It fills a research gap in two respects: Firstly, it illuminates a discipline that has hardly been at the center of social science-oriented COVID-19 research. Secondly, it examines perceived stress and its underlying reasons, adding to the already well-researched short-term effects of the pandemic on the work of academics, such as available working time, publication frequency and research output. In this manner, insights can be gained into the longer-term consequences of the pandemic and specific problem areas, which can be used to inform and legitimize (higher education) policies to address inequalities in academia.

By focusing on stress, the article also ties in with research on the state of the psychological health of academics, which has recently generated increased interest due to worrying tendencies at universities. There are ongoing efforts in the field of communication studies to establish a reliable database for a closer examination of this issue. This includes the cross-national Publish and Perish project, whose findings reiterate that „[h]igh levels of work-related stress and emotional burden are the norm rather than the exception in today's academic world” (Hanitzsch et al., 2023, p. 12).

Studies show that university employees around the world and across different qualification and career levels are more at risk than other professionals of mental health problems, such as burnout, depression or anxiety (Nicholls et al., 2022). Among the reasons for this are job insecurity, competition for positions, the high pressure to publish and the need to constantly seek research funding (e. g. Camargo et al., 2015; Sang et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic and containment measures have increased the workload on scientists,

however, this burden is not evenly distributed but differs according to professional and private context factors. Based on these considerations, this article focuses on the question of new or growing inequalities among communication scholars.

The experience of burden and stress can arise from diverse factors and entail various outcomes. In this study, particular attention is paid to the stresses caused by the radical changes in people's daily lives following the outbreak of the pandemic. Among these are additional caring responsibilities due to the closure of schools and day-care centers or the absence of private carers, concerns about one's own health and the health of close relatives, and the risk of blurring the boundaries between work and private life by shifting work to the home office. We assume that the extent to which support or solidarity is offered by the employing institution, and by superiors and colleagues, is likely to play a role in the individual perception of stress. This article examines the aspects mentioned above and uses empirical data to analyze which social subgroups in communication studies were particularly burdened by the pandemic and its associated constraints. Gender and parenthood¹ are given special attention in this context as we assume they are key factors for inequality during the pandemic. The research forms part of a wider investigation into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication scholars' lives and work in three countries: Germany, Austria and Switzerland. It focused on the employment situation of participants during the initial 15-month period following the onset of the pandemic. The questionnaire encompassed inquiries about work hours, self-evaluation of publication achievements, research results, the transition to online teaching, individual situations, marital status, caregiving duties, housing status, along with strains, obstacles, and official and unofficial supportive structures. While we have discussed the impact of the pandemic on scholars' working hours and scientific output elsewhere (Müller et al., 2023), this paper is primarily concerned with the experience of stress and strain associated with the pandemic-related upheavals of everyday life.² It is structured as follows: Chapter two considers the category of gender and gender inequalities in academia. Chapter three investigates pandemic-related stressors as well as previous research on gender and parenthood in this context. Chapter four is devoted to the methodological design of the study, and Chapter five presents results on the aspects of stress and strain. These findings are contextualized and discussed in

Chapter six and summarized and critically assessed in the concluding Chapter seven.

2. The gendered nature of academic work and life

Following social constructivist approaches in gender studies, we consider gender as a socially constructed concept. The terms ‚women‘ and ‚men‘ are socially defined categories that become significant in everyday life through socially anchored processes of attribution and articulation. In our understanding of these terms and their connections, we rely on people’s gender self-identification, even if they do not fit into the rigid framework of a heteronormative gender binary. Individuals within societies enact gender concepts by doing gender (West and Zimmermann, 1987), but can also deconstruct them through deviant articulations that challenge established constructs (Butler, 2006). At the societal level, these ongoing articulations make gender culturally significant and reproduce the symbolic system of gender binary (Hagemann-White, 1984) that functions as a structuring principle of society (Rakow, 1986). Both become relevant when it comes to articulating not only one’s gender but also one’s identity as both a professional and a caregiver.

The consistency of gender binary has consequences for scholars both as a professional and a caregiver: Both fields are, on the one hand, shaped by gendered structures. On the other hand, the subjective (de-)construction of gender renews these structures. „Gendered structures“ are generally „permeating academic institutions“ (Bender et al., 2021, p. 48) as a working field, as the „structuring effects of gendering processes [...] conform with the structures of dominance“ (Becker-Schmidt, 2002, p. 26). Research has demonstrated that female academics have fewer career opportunities compared to their male colleagues (Le Feuvre et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2022). Furthermore, they encounter higher levels of stress caused by a family-hostile work environment prevalent in universities, which affects women disproportionately due to the persistence of traditional gender roles (Gao Santos and Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Fathima et al., 2020). Although the gender gap in academia is narrowing as the number of doctoral degrees awarded to women is on the rise, there are still significant gender differences in terms of tenured and fixed-term appointments and professorships (Camargo et al., 2015). This is also evident in German-language communication studies (Riesmeyer and Huber, 2011, p. 16), which can be described as a „gendered organization“ (Prommer et al., 2006). Previous

research shows that fundamental structures of inequality have not been broken down since the early 2000s: Women hold only one-third of the full professorships (Prommer and Riesmeyer, 2020, p. 7) and half of the postdoc positions, even though they represent most doctoral students (Engesser and Magin, 2014, p. 319).

We assume that gender, as a structural category and significant factor in identity construction, influenced the subjective experience of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the necessary reorganization of occupational and possibly also care work takes place along gendered structures both within the home and workplace. This is also the case for highly qualified people living in partnerships (Wimbauer, 2012), as traditional gender identifications tend to be articulated in the context of partnerships, which are more dominant than career-oriented identity articulations. Accordingly, women, independently of their professional status, are more likely to take on domestic caregiving responsibilities than men, which leads to a gendering of these activities as tasks that are mainly performed by women. Based on these considerations, this paper explores how pandemic-related changes to daily life have impacted communication researchers’ perception of stress and burden, paying particular attention to the structural categories of gender and parenthood as possible influences on these effects.

3. Who shoulders the load? Pandemic-induced stressors, gender, parenthood and perception of burden

In this chapter, we address the key factors that may have led to an increase in feelings of burden and stress during the pandemic and set out our assumptions for this paper based on what we already know about this from prior research. When it comes to assessing the consequences of COVID-19 for occupational work, the impact of the pandemic can be measured, on the one hand, by the number of hours worked, professional output and success. Such research enables the use of comparable data and metrics for informed assessments of real-world contexts. In terms of academic work, studies have shown that female academics published less and had lower research output overall after the pandemic outbreak (e. g. Andersen et al., 2020; Squazzoni et al., 2021). Compared to their male peers, they were more negatively affected by the containment measures, especially when raising children, due to the double burden of professional and care work (Kasymova et al., 2021, p. 430; Martucci, 2021, pp.

17–18; Müller et al., 2023). Moreover, the experience of being confronted with radical change in everyday professional and personal life has an impact not only on immediate work performance but also on how people evaluate and experience their working and living conditions (Deryugina et al., 2021). Furthermore, pandemic-related experiences of stress and feeling overwhelmed can also have long-term effects and pose a lasting threat to the professional careers of those affected (Czerney and Eckert, 2022, p. 25). Based on previous research into the pandemic's impact on scholars' work and lives, key stressors include the added responsibility of caring duties, anxieties regarding loved ones' health and well-being, and the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life due to remote working arrangements. We will discuss these stressors in more detail below and compile research findings on their impact.

The perception of feeling overwhelmed or 'being loaded' during the pandemic is probably linked to the demands of paid employment and unpaid caregiving responsibilities. Research suggests that women's greater involvement in care work is due to the disproportionate impact of the traditional division of domestic labor on women, regardless of their occupation, including academia. However, it can be seen that the sudden closure of both kindergartens and schools resulted in a significant investment of time by both parents in the care and education of their children (e. g. Deryugina et al., 2021; Muschalla et al., 2022). This is also substantiated by our prior research (Müller et al., 2023), indicating that communication scholars with parental responsibilities had to spend a significant amount of time caring for children in addition to their professional obligations, and were, thus, exposed to a double burden. Whilst the authors have shown that the gender gap in this area was smaller than expected – although mothers still devoted more time to care work overall than fathers (Müller et al., 2023) – several studies point to academic mothers being particularly burdened by care work (Deryugina et al., 2021; Kasymova et al., 2021; Jiwnani, 2022; Shalaby et al., 2021), especially if they had younger children (Gordon and Presseau, 2022).

In addition to the higher investment of time in the care and schooling of children, concern about one's own health and the health of close relatives and loved ones was another factor of strain during the pandemic, which increased the risk of psychological sequelae, such as anxieties, depression or burnout. Particularly in the first phase of the pandemic, when vaccination

against the virus was not yet possible, there was a constant risk of infection, with sometimes devastating consequences, especially for vulnerable groups such as the elderly or people with preexisting conditions. This often undervalued and unpaid emotional labor, also referred to as the „third shift” (Power, 2020, p. 67), while potentially affecting both men and women, is deeply gendered, as studies show (Malisch et al., 2020; Petts et al., 2021; Umamaheswar and Tan, 2020). According to sociologist Chung, a woman is primarily responsible for „ensuring the emotional wellbeing of not only her children but also parents and other family members. In other words, they are in charge of the mental load of worrying about the family” (2020; also see Power, 2020, p. 67). Umamaheswar and Tan (2020, p. 8) show, through their qualitative interview study, that additional care work and the associated mental load during the pandemic was also taken on comparatively more by those women who were unmarried and/or had no children.

The third stressor considered here is the abrupt shift of work to the home office, which became common during the COVID-19 containment measures for people whose work did not require the provision of services or the use of large machinery – thus, including communication scholars. What, on the one hand, can be seen as a privilege of white-collar jobs because it involves greater flexibility and more options regarding the timing of work (Dunatchik et al., 2021), can, on the other hand, be burdensome. This may be the case, for example, when is not sufficient space available at home (Flaherty, 2020), if the transition of teaching to an online mode is associated with increased preparation effort (Minello et al., 2021), if there is a lack of social exchange with colleagues or even the threat of loneliness (e. g. Tavares, 2017). Moving work into the private home generally always carries the risk that these two spheres will become intermingled and the private life sphere will be increasingly infiltrated by the structures of employment (Minello et al., 2021).

Additionally, results show that the pandemic had a different impact on the academic work of parents in contrast to scholars living without children. The former were affected by the circumstance that the home is where they had to look after their children during the pandemic, while simultaneously fulfilling their professional duties. Instead of having an exclusive space or designated time for academic research and teaching, they basically had to work around the clock to meet their various paid and unpaid obligations (Craig and Churchill, 2021). Studies from before the

pandemic show that more flexible working models not only offer opportunities for increased gender equality by opening up room for action, but can also reinforce traditional divisions of labor (Power, 2020). In Austria, after the lockdowns came into force, it was found that women were less likely to have their own room at home than their male partners, and in households with children, it was mostly the mothers who did their work in the room where the children were (Berghammer, 2022; Derndorfer et al., 2021). Studies that have examined the working situation of academics during the pandemic (e. g. Carreri and Dordoni, 2020; Martucci, 2021) have come to comparable conclusions. Peetz et al. (2022) also point out the important aspect that women had less space for „sustained knowledge work” at home compared to men due to the role expectations that became effective at home, as they found out in their qualitative study with researchers in Australia and Canada.

Against this backdrop, our study explores the question of the extent to which communication scholars perceived the first one and a half years of the pandemic as burdensome (RQ1) and by which stress factors they felt particularly affected (RQ2). Special attention is paid to the structural characteristics of gender and parenthood. In this way, we build on the line of research that deals with the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on society. Our contribution is to generate knowledge on the emergence of new inequalities in academia and here, particularly within the discipline of communication studies. Based on our theoretical considerations and the state of research presented, we assume that respondents who identified as female felt more burdened by the additional unpaid care work than those who identified as male (H1). Analogously, we assume that this was more likely to be the case for mothers than for fathers (H1a), and for those raising children more than for respondents without parenting responsibilities (H1b). We also hypothesize that communication scholars who identify as female felt more burdened due to the concern for the mental or physical health of close ones than their colleagues who identified as male (H2). This presumably applies to mothers more than fathers (H2a) and parents more than respondents without parental responsibilities (H2b). In the same way, we expect that communication scholars who identified as female felt more burdened by the shift to the home office than their colleagues who identified as male (H3), similarly, mothers more than fathers (H3a), and parents more than respondents who do not parent (H3b).

4. Method

The approach of the study was to describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the research and teaching-oriented faculty in German-language communication studies on all levels and in all forms of employment: from early career researchers to professors and from short-term, project-related employment to continuing positions.

4.1. Participants

Respondents for the survey were recruited in collaboration with three professional academic associations: „Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft” (DGPuK, Germany), „Österreichische Gesellschaft für Kommunikationswissenschaft” (ÖGK, Austria) and „Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaft” (SGKM, Switzerland). A web survey was distributed using newsletters and direct mailings to the members of the respective associations. The online survey ran from 14 April to 7 May 2021. At that time, as published in their reports and on their websites, the DGPuK had 1214 members (610 women, 604 men), the SGKM had 272 members (145 women, 139 men) and the ÖGK had 103 members (47 women, 56 men). A prerequisite for participation was employment at a university, university of applied sciences or research institution.

Incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the analysis, which resulted in a sample of $n = 293$ respondents. We did not exclude individuals who refused to give personal information, such as age or gender; overall, we accounted 40.4 percent of individuals who self-identify as male, 58.6 percent who self-identify as female and 1.1 percent who identify as nonbinary. The latter are not considered in this paper as its aim is an analytical differentiation between those who identify as male and those who identify as female. A total of 77.4 percent and, hence, the majority of the participants relate themselves to the DGPuK and, additionally, 14 percent have a dual membership (DGPuK plus SGKM or DGPuK plus ÖGK). The sample, thus, included a higher proportion of women but was mostly balanced in terms of age and professional status. The average age was 41.7 years, and 39.8 percent report that they are living together with children who are 19 years old or younger. Overall, the sample shows a high percentage of academics living in partnerships (71.9 % of female and 79.1 % of male respondents), and while 65.9 percent of all female

respondents have children, this applies to only 51 percent of the male participants. The majority (72 %) of the respondents of the survey work up to 100 percent (employment level of at least 75 %) and 40 percent are in continuing positions.

4.2. Measures

Participants were asked to fill out an online survey featuring demographic questions, questions on academic career, position and university; the respondents were also asked to describe their family status (i. e. relationship, raising children) and give some information related to the employment status of their partner (i. e. part-time or full-time job). The main questions were conceptualized to explore the impact of the pandemic and related regulations, and restrictions on teaching, research and service, with a specific focus on questions about which pandemic-induced contexts in the living and working situation the respondents experienced as burdensome. All items were reviewed by experts and pretested on a small scale ($n = 12$). Dichotomous items were used as well as 5-point Likert items (1 = strongly disagree / 5 = strongly agree), next to dropdown items to retrieve the volume of time invested in care, household, leisure and academic work. Regarding the impact of the pandemic, we were able to combine formal questions, such as the volume of hours spent for professional, care and household work, and the support universities offered during the pandemic, with questions for self-evaluation around the individual perception of burden.

4.3. Statistical Analysis

As the study was interested in differences regarding how much the pandemic impacted academics in the dimensions of teaching, research, output and mental health related to gender and care duties, particularly raising children, comparisons were made using Pearson's chi-squared test (Cohen, 1988; Field, 2009), supported by SPSS. The findings presented in the following refer to the last semester in spring 2021. The children's age was grouped for analytical reasons in order to differentiate according to the type of care/schooling.

5. Findings

5.1. Gender, parenthood and the burden of care during the pandemic

We did chi-squared tests to analyze whether more

communication scholars who identify as female compared to their male colleagues report that they feel burdened by care work (for children and other people close to them) since the beginning of the pandemic. It was not significant ($p = .942$), which means that feeling burdened by care work is not interrelated with gender. H1 was falsified. This insight is also reflected in percentage terms: Nearly the same percentage (38.5 %) of female respondents report that they felt (partly) burdened as male (39.6 %). Consistently, 54.5 percent of both female and male respondents reported feeling mostly no or no stress from care work in the past twelve months.³

Furthermore, we tested if communication scholars who identify as female and raise children feel more burdened than their male colleagues who identify as male and also raise children. This chi-squared test was not significant ($p = .998$). A total of 71.9 percent of the communication scholars who identify as female and raise children and 71.4 percent of those who identify as male and raise children felt burdened, whereas only 17.5 percent of the communication scholars who identify as female and raise children and 17.9 percent of their colleagues who identify as male and raise children report that they did not feel burdened – there is no difference based on gender as the proportions are virtually identical. H1a was also falsified.

Thirdly, we also analyzed whether communication scholars who raise children feel more burdened by care work compared to those who do not raise children. The chi-squared test was highly significant ($p = .000$). The data shows that being responsible for underaged children in the pandemic is experienced as a stressor that has an impact on both female and male communication scholars. H3 was verified. While 71.7 percent of the communication scholars with children surveyed felt that they were partially burdened or burdened, only 10.7 percent of their colleagues without children said they experienced the same. Vice versa, the picture is just as clear: While 17.7 percent of communication scholars with children state that they have felt little or no stress from care work in the last twelve months, a majority of communication scholars without children (86.3 %) say that they have felt no stress from care work. Being in the dual role of a parent and a communication scholar, therefore, means to be burdened significantly, no matter if the respondents identify as female or male.

5.2. Being concerned about the mental or physical health of others

We also wanted to know if being a communication scholar and identifying as female was interrelated with feeling burdened by being concerned about the mental or physical health of close ones compared to being a communication scholar and identifying as male. The chi-squared test was not significant ($p = .327$). H4 was, therefore, falsified. Nevertheless, more women (60.8 %) report that they feel (partly) burdened because of concerns about health issues of people close to them than men (52.2 %) and fewer women (19.3 %) than men (25.2 %) report that they mainly do not or not at all feel burdened because of concerns regarding the mental or physical health of people close to them.

Again, we tested whether being a communication scholar who identifies as female and raises children is interrelated to being more burdened by concerns about the mental and physical health of people close to them than communication scholars who raise children and identify as male. The chi-squared test was not significant ($p = .710$). H5 was also falsified. There is also only a little difference regarding the percentages, as 63.2 percent of the female and 67.9 percent of the male communication scholars raising children report that they feel burdened by concerns about health issues of people close to them, whereas 15.8 percent of the female and 17.9 percent of the male respondents with children report that they do not feel worried or only a little bit. However, it can be noted that the majority of communication scholars who care for children are concerned about the mental or physical health of people close to them.

In order to find out if there are differences between communication scholars raising children and their colleagues without parental obligations regarding a burden caused by concerns about the mental or physical health of close ones, we tested this interrelation as well. The chi-squared test was not significant ($p = .071$). Therefore, H6 was also falsified. Nevertheless, parents are more likely to report that they have felt partly burdened or burdened by concerns about the mental or physical health of people close to them during the last twelve months (65.5 %) than their colleagues without children (51.8 %). Only 16.8 percent of parents do not feel burdened by concerns about the health of people close to them (predominantly or not at all), whereas the number of respondents without children who report the same is 8.2 percent points higher (25 %).

5.3. How working in a home office is perceived by communication scholars

The implementation of the home office was an unforeseen disruption that challenged everyday working routines and practices during the pandemic, especially of those who lived with others. Therefore, we also tested if communication scholars felt burdened by working at home.

We wanted to know if communication scholars who identify as female reported to be more burdened by the forced transition to the home office than those who identify as male. This might be because of their higher involvement in domestic care work, which is expected to result in a stronger entanglement of professional and domestic work. Thus, the respondents were asked whether they experienced working at home as a burden because professional and private life were intermingled. The chi-squared test was not significant ($p = .493$), which means that H7 was falsified as well. Remarkably, even a larger number of male respondents (53.5 %) report that they partly or fundamentally felt burdened by the intermingling of professional and private life, compared to 47.6 percent of female respondents who reported the same. By contrast, about one-third of male and female respondents reported that they felt hardly burdened by the intermingling of private and professional life or not at all. We can, thus, note that the community is ambivalent about whether the home office is experienced as burdensome.

It was also examined if communication scholars who identify as female and are raising children felt more burdened by the intermingling of professional and private life than their colleagues identifying as male who are also raising children. We did a chi-squared test which was not significant ($p = .704$). This, H8 was falsified. The data shows that men raising children feel more burdened by working in the home office than women raising children: 66.1 percent of male communication scholars living together with children felt burdened by the intermingling of work and private life, but only 43.9 percent of their colleagues who identify as female and live in the same constellation. Another chi-squared test shows that the interrelationship of identifying as male, raising children and perceiving the home office as a burden is significant ($p = .003$). Thus, gender, raising children and feeling burdened by the home office is interrelated, but for those identifying as male and not as female. Additionally, only 14.3 percent of the male respondents raising children say that they felt little or

not at all burdened by the intermingling of private and professional life in the home office, whereas 29.3 percent of the female respondents raising children report the same.

Another chi-squared test was done in order to analyze whether communication scholars who raise children feel more burdened by the intermingling of professional and private life while working at home in the pandemic compared to those who do not raise children. It was not significant ($p = .095$). This leads to the conclusion that H3b was also falsified. Nevertheless, 54.9 percent of the communication scholars raising children but 46.7 percent who are not raising children report that they felt partly or fundamentally burdened by working at home, which is a difference of 8.2 percent. Furthermore, 22.1 percent of the communication scholars raising children report that they feel only a little or not at all burdened by the intermingling of professional and private life – which is a difference of 12 percent compared to those who are not raising children (34.1 %). Communication scholars with children in their household are, thus, slightly more negatively affected by the home office than those without children.

6. Discussion

While a lot of the research on the consequences of the pandemic in academia centers on questions of men and women's publication activity (e. g. Andersen et al., 2020; Squazzoni et al., 2021) and on the forced redistribution of professional and care work (e. g. Deryugina et al. 2021; Kasymova et al. 2021), we have focused in this paper on the individual experiences of burden among academics in a particular discipline, namely, communication studies. The results show that across the groups studied, parents felt the greatest stress during the first year and a half of the pandemic (RQ1). Compared to nonparents, they consistently exhibited the highest levels of agreement with the items describing burdens. In this respect, only the finding on the stress caused by transferring work to the home office was surprising, because parents did not find the resulting stronger blending of the private and professional spheres more stressful than nonparents. One reason for this could be that families generally have more space available at home and, thus, there are potentially more places to retreat to work that could be used during times without childcare obligations. It is also conceivable that it was perceived as a privilege to be able to combine childcare – at least theoretically – with job requirements and not have to face the risk of

working away from home. By contrast, it can be assumed that younger respondents without children sometimes live in housing constellations in which they only have one room available (e. g. shared apartments) and, thus, had to live and work in a confined space. Particularly those living alone may have felt stressed by the home office concept, because living and working had to take place in isolation, and this may have had an impact on their psychological well-being (Czerney and Eckert, 2022).

Gender differences regarding perceived burden are generally smaller than expected in our study, which is consistent with the results on self-assessed academic output during the pandemic (Müller et al., 2023). It is possible that women, due to their socialization as women and, thus, as caretakers and managers of the family (Jurczyk, 2020, p. 86), for whom the professional and private spheres are already more intermingled, are better able to cope with the extraordinary challenges than men, and especially fathers, for whom this experience had a more exceptional character. Their inevitably greater caregiving and housework demands during the pandemic, therefore, also seem to have thrown them more off track. Of the stressors surveyed, concern about the health of close relatives proved to be the greatest stress factor across all groups. As expected, the additional care work and the spill-over effects from the overlap of working at home and caregiving responsibilities were particularly significant for parents (RQ2).

The data generally demonstrate that the initial eighteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic were regarded as burdensome by most communication scholars for a variety of reasons. The strain from these experiences is bound to influence the academic work of scholars and may ensue in deeper and more prolonged effects than the pandemic itself. Universities have a responsibility to address the related social inequalities that arise or are exacerbated among their staff.

7. Conclusion

While the study at hand offers valid and reliable results, there are certain limitations in terms of the accuracy of the data collected. The first limitation to mention is that the survey is based on self-reports which come with an inevitable potential for response bias. In our case, respondents may be inclined to estimate their own involvement in care work to be greater because they felt challenged by the overall

situation. They may also have assessed their stress levels as higher than they actually were because, for example, media reports repeatedly referred to the extraordinary strains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and it, therefore, seemed legitimate to express disproportionate burden. At the same time, respondents may have been reluctant to state the full extent of their perceived excessive demands. However, since we focused on subjective feelings of stress in this study, we can assume that the data can be correlated to give a coherent picture of which respondents felt particularly stressed during the investigation period.

The present study and its significance are also limited by the fact that only German-speaking countries were taken into account and no further-reaching transnational study was conducted. After all, different cultural contexts and sociopolitical framework conditions of the anti-pandemic measures also play a role in the experiences of stress. A study by Abramo et al. (2021) shows, for example, that female scholars in France, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland were more negatively affected by the pandemic than male scholars, whereas men in Germany and Spain felt stronger effects on their academic output than women (p. 9).

Our survey focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives and work of communication scholars in the period of the first 15 months. On this basis, it is not possible to make statements about the longer-term consequences for those affected and the further development of the discipline. It is still unclear, for example, whether the stresses and strains have decreased again after all measures in the German-speaking countries have ended or whether consequential problems have arisen from this, possibly even with the result that people have left the field of higher education and research. The enormous potential for future studies is, therefore, obvious. These could build on the data presented and focus on a longer period to analyze the impact of the pandemic on inequalities in academia. In addition, exploratory evidence is needed to understand the differences in objective and subjective burden, the concrete impact of pandemic-related constraints and perceptions of these, especially in relation to potential spillover effects from the overlap of home-based work and care responsibilities. This could be investigated in qualitative studies, aiming to explore the connections between COVID-19 burdens, academic work and individual career opportunities in more depth, while also giving voice to positions of respondents beyond

heteronormativity, gender binary and conventional family situations which were not sufficiently considered in the present study.

In our online survey, we also asked to what extent colleagues and supervisors had taken into account the extraordinary situation of employees with care responsibilities and/or other special burdens during the pandemic and whether the universities had offered support or respondents had taken advantage of it. The answers suggest that even rather cost-neutral possibilities on the part of the universities were not fully exploited. Exemplarily, only 35.2 percent of respondents reported that they were offered a contract extension, while the same number indicated that they were offered a time extension for qualification agreements. Additional childcare services were provided to only 16.4 percent of respondents, while the tool of teaching reduction was seldom used at all and offered to only 8.5 percent of respondents. Similarly, access to additional work support from student assistants was given to only 21.2 percent of respondents. It can be reasonably assumed that institutional and collegial support may well contribute to a lower sense of strain or may mitigate or even prevent long-term effects on the mental health of scholars, since pressure is relieved in this way and the work is less stressful. However, this correlation could not be systematically pursued and evaluated in this article.

Against the background of the statements on institutional support outlined in the discussion, it would also be important to ask what resources could help to prevent the inequality gap from widening – these resources can be found in not only community structures and friends and family, but also in the creation of certain institutional framework conditions. Universities have a responsibility not only to take note of the numerous research findings on gender differences and other inequalities and vulnerabilities that were reinforced during the pandemic, but also to actively incorporate them into their policies, regulations and committee decisions by formulating standards on how such factors can also be considered in hiring and staff management. Most importantly, the university will reap the benefits of this strategy with the ability to attract and retain excellent researchers without fear of the ‚brain drain’ or the need to compensate for long absences. After all, research goes beyond mere survival in a competitive environment and requires a diverse, humane and sustainable working environment in order to flourish.

¹When the text speaks of mothers or fathers, it does not necessarily refer to biological parents, but to a person who identifies as female or male, lives with children and is responsible for raising them.

²Franziska Weder (Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien) also contributed as a research partner to the data collection and data analysis. The authors thank her for the cooperation working on this project.

³We formulated the question as a retrospective of the last twelve months of work experience.

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[26](#)