Remote work and family duties. Sociological analysis of selected problems in the functioning of families with minor children during COVID-19

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Abstract

The difficulty of balancing professional and personal roles is a challenge in everyday life. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that it can be even more difficult. The aim of this paper is to present the results of a study on the attempt to maintain balance between work and family life during the Covid-19 pandemic. The problems faced by parents of children who were homeschooled will be presented. The analysis is based on several main problems faced by the respondents: time conflict, conflict of space, and role conflict. The result of the undertaken research is a typology of daily functioning strategies developed by parents during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords:
lockdown, distance education, Covid-19 pandemic, remote work, work-life balance.

← Piotr Kotlicki, *Marzenia i koszmary*

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic took the whole world by surprise. Overnight, the society had to adapt to the restrictions imposed due to the spread of the coronavirus. Apart from numerous restrictions related to maintaining hygiene and social distancing, new challenges have arisen in terms of daily functioning in the sanitary regime. "The coronavirus pandemic has become the quintessence of the risk society. Nobody feels sure of their health, keeping their place of work, or their social position." (Długosz, 2021, p. 10). The period of the lockdown turned out to be particularly severe with the closure of nurseries, kindergartens and schools, when many employees began to perform their duties in the home-office mode. "In addition to health problems, the COVID-19 pandemic has also brought changes in many areas of social life: the closure of schools and workplaces, economic problems, as well as isolation from loved ones and limitation of social contacts. The stress of being in quarantine and long-term isolation has occurred." (Dymecka, 2021, p. 1). This state of affairs forced many parents to reconcile their professional duties with taking care of minor children. As a result, numerous problems arose, involving primarily the conflict of roles in the family and at work), conflict of time (necessity to perform many activities at the same time), strain-based conflict (tensions transferred from one area of life to another) as well as a specific conflict of space (adapting limited space and resources to the requirements of many tasks).

This article aims to present the results of research carried out among professionally active parents of minor children, who had to combine household and professional duties during the lockdown period in Poland. The general issue of the study can be focused around the difficulties experienced by parents during the lockdown, and which difficulties result

from the issues of time, role conflict or spatial limitations. The research was aimed at finding the answer to the following questions: How do parents working remotely from home reconcile professional tasks with family responsibilities? Do the professional and non-professional roles conflict with each other and, if yes, how? In what manner do spatial limitations and technological resources affect the balance between professional and non-professional life?

Work-life balance – theoretical framework

The possibility of reconciling family and professional duties is the subject of analysis within the concept of work-life balance, which is why it will become the background for the presentation of the discussed research problem. Balance between work and family life attracts interest of many researchers. "Work–life balance (WLB) has become the focus of growing public and policy interest, both internationally and within the EU, in the context of socio-demographic changes, in particular, increased female labour market participation, and of business objectives concerning employees' performance and productivity." (Gregory, Milner, 2009, p. 122). The first analyses of this issue appeared in the 1990s, as an aftermath of several important factors: mass entry of women into the labour market in the 1970s and 1980s, changes in the traditional family model – from the "male bread-winner model – female home career" to "dual earner model" change in the social roles of women and men, development of technology (especially digital one), the functioning of the so-called "greedy institutions", which "make total claims on their members and… attempt to encompass within their circle the whole personality (…) they seek exclusive and undivided loyalty." (Coser, 1974, p. 4) decline in the women's fertility rate in highly developed countries. "Although

research on the work–family interface encompasses a wide range of substantive issues, two common themes have been (1) examining the relation of psychosocial work characteristics to family-related outcomes and (2) examining the relation of psychosocial family characteristics to workrelated outcomes." (Frone, Yardley, Markel, 1997, p. 146). For the purposes of this article, the issue of work-life balance will be defined as "Work-family balance is defined as accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between and individual and his or her role-related partners in the work and family domains." The concept of work-life balance is very often analysed in the context of another important issue, that is, the work-family conflict, which also focuses on the clash between the professional and non-professional activities of an individual. "Work-family conflict is considered to emanate from the mostly intentional decisions to meet the demands of one role by shifting time, attention and energy resources from another role." (Bayazit & Bayazit, 2019, p. 406). In the literature, several trends related to the analysis of the concept of work-life balance can be observed. The first one focuses on the conflict of roles, which may hamper the balance between work and personal life (see more: Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Clark, 2000; Voydanoff, 2002; Voydanoff, 2005; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). "Role conflict occurs when the role that an individual undertakes does not match his personality traits, when he has to deal with more than one role or when he internalizes one role more than the others." (Benligiray, Sönmez, 2012, p. 3872). The second tend draws attention to the conflict of time, whose distribution or deficit may interfere with the fulfilment of professional and family duties. "Time-based conflict refers to the conflict that arises when the time devoted to one role makes it difficult

for the individual to participate in the other role." (Ahmad, 2008, p. 58). Another approach emphasises the strain-based conflict. "Strain-based conflict occurs when strain created by the work (family) role interferes with performing family (work) responsibilities. For example, irritability and anxiety created by work interfere with performing family duties and vice versa." (Netemeyer, Boles, McMurrian, 1996, p. 401). Analysing the current situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, one can also observe a specific spatial/equipment conflict, perceived as insufficient, limited housing resources significantly hindering the performance of professional and non-professional tasks. We are dealing here with a situation in which home office duties, remote education of children, as well as caring over the youngest and dependent family members must take place in a limited living space, together with other daily activities. "The quality of life in the family during a pandemic takes on a completely different dimension. As a result of the restrictions, it is necessary to reorganize life in every sphere." (Płoszaj, Kochman, 2021, p. 59).

Maintaining balance between personal and professional life when strain-based conflict, as well as conflicts of time, roles, and space co-occur seems difficult to accomplish. The situation of the pandemic evidently only exacerbates the problems resulting from fulfilling multiple roles. Below, results of research conducted among professionally active parents of children are presented, who had to combine working remotely and performing family duties in the situation of lockdown.

Methodology of the author's own research

The study whose small fragment is presented in this article was conducted in the spring of 2020, during the lockdown which took place in Poland as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The aim of the study was an attempt at answering the questions concerning the feasibility of reconciling family life with professional work during this lockdown. Several fundamental research questions were posed: How do professionally active parents reconcile their professional duties with parental responsibilities? Whether – and to what extent – the conflicts of time and roles are present in their case? Do they feel the strain connected with their roles and how does it affect their daily functioning? Has there occurred a problem with performing remote work and distance learning in a limited living space with limited technological resources? How did parents manage to reconcile the professional and personal sphere during the Covid-19 pandemic?

The qualitative research included professionally active parents of children under 12. It was assumed that older children are relatively independent and do not require as much parental supervision as younger children. An important factor in the selection of respondents was having children under the age of 12 and the need to reconcile family and professional duties in the living space. During the lockdown, some of the respondents performed work commissioned by their superiors/employers, which was not consistent with their daily professional activity (e.g. order processing, settlement, inventory, reporting). The qualitative method was used of an in-depth interview carried out remotely. The sampling was purposive and was done using the snowball method. Each interview lasted an average of 60–120 minutes using instant messaging. A total of 25 interviews were conducted with 14 women and 11 men. Respondents ranged in age from 30 to 52 years. The table below presents the basic characteristics of the respondents:

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents

Gender	Female	14
	Male	11
Age	30–35	9
	36–40	9
	41–45	4
	46–50	2
	51 and more	1
Number of children	1	1
	2	14
	3	8
	4 and more	2
Place of residence	Village	1
	Town to 20 thousand	1
	Town 20–100 thousand	6
	City 101–500 thousand	14
	City 501 thousand and more	3
Education	Primary / lower secondary	0
	Vocational	3
	Secondary (High school / Liceum)	2
	Secondary (High school / Technical)	6
	Higher (licenciate)	4
	Higher (MA)	10

Source: Own research.

Remote work and the conflict of time

The Covid-19 pandemic has largely redefined the functioning of entire societies. The necessity of lockdown entailed the adaptation of professional life to the new conditions. Many employers – if only possible – decided to have their employees work remotely from home. According to a study conducted by scholars from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan on a sample of 2,500 respondents, "Slightly more than 14% of respondents perform their professional duties in the same way as they did before the crisis." (Drozdowski, Frąckowiak, Krajewski, Kubacka, Modrzyk, Rogowski, Rura, Stamm, 2020, p. 14). This solution was to maintain the continuity of business operations, but also to protect jobs. In many cases, remote work is highly convenient for employees, who can perform professional tasks from virtually anywhere and, often, at any time. This flexibility is especially beneficial for parents looking after very young children, who do not want to forgo their professional development. However, the pandemic forced the employees working remotely to adapt their home space to the requirements of professional work. This refers not only to the issue of hardware (computer, webcam, high-speed internet connections), but also, and perhaps above all, adjusting space in its physical dimension – creating an office. The introduction of distance learning for children at all levels of education, became an additional difficulty, as it entailed the need for many organisational changes. The performance of professional duties while supervising distance learning of younger children turned out to be problematic. In many cases, it involved an overlap of on-line lessons with virtual business meetings. A conflict of time occurred – the infeasibility of combining professional and parental responsibilities. *In practice, sitting in a swivel chair, I moved between my laptop, which I used to contact other staff members, and the computer on which my daughter had on-line lessons. (…). Sometimes, I did not have to distract myself from professional activities, but at other times I spent practically all the time assisting my daughter because of, for example, a problem with logging onto the remote learning platform* (W2, F-38, project manager, 2K).[1] In many cases – as the respondents emphasise – remote education required total commitment of the guardians, as teachers requested the presence of parents during the lessons in order to improve student discipline and the comfort of the teachers' work. *In the case of my son, I had to participate in his lessons together with him. The early primary education teacher did not cope with class management and "asked" us – parents – to support her with our presence. In practice, a parent's absence was viewed in a negative light and the class teacher voiced her disapproval* (W6, M-32, economist, 1K).[2] However, parents working as teachers themselves were in the most difficult situation. Here, the conflict of time was especially acute, as they had to teach remotely as well as supervise / assist their own children in remote learning. *Oh, we were in a pretty pickle… I ran English classes for my students on one computer, my son, tablet in hand, had his lessons in the kitchen, while my daughter was logged on the Librus platform on my husband's laptop. Her lessons caused the greatest difficulty, as the system crashed frequently and she repeatedly asked for help, making it difficult for me to conduct classes. In practice, I was operating in two virtual spaces at the same time: my own one and my daughter's one* (W1, F-44, teacher, K2). The conflict of time also concerned the problem of carrying out daily household chores. The respondents pointed out that even tasks such as cooking dinner or turning on the washing machine were problematic in many cases, as almost all rooms in the home were occupied by children and adults working remotely. The conditions were often uncomfortable, and the need to use a webcam exacerbated the discomfort. Those who could perform pro-

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1 W2: interview no. 2, F-38: a 38-year-old woman, project manager in an international company, 2K: having two kids.
2 W6: interview no. 6, M-32: a 32-year-old man, economist, 1K: having one kid.

fessional duties at any time were in a much more advantageous situation, because most remote lessons ended in the early afternoon opening the possibility of remote work for the parents. Permanent conflict of time makes an employee lose the sense of security and control of things, reducing efficiency both in the professional and non-professional sphere. The inability to reconcile many activities to be performed at the same time collapses the entirety of life like a pack of dominoes. The Covid-19 pandemic results in a conflict of time in persons who previously coped well with time management, while in people who suffered from constant lack of time the conflict was exacerbated.

Conflict of roles and strain-based conflict

Maintaining balance between personal and professional life is often difficult due to the conflict between the roles which employees perform simultaneously. The difficulty arises when the performance of one role makes it difficult, or even impossible, to perform another. Professional and family roles are the most frequently in opposition here, as the vast majority of the adult population find these two spheres of life the most absorbing. In the spring 2020 lockdown situation in Poland, such a conflict was especially apparent. Many employees had problems with the performance of professional duties due to the increased burden of parental and home responsibilities. (Frone, Yardley, Markel, 1997, p. 145–167). At the same time, many parents faced difficulties in fulfilling their professional tasks. The closure of schools, kindergartens and nurseries necessitated providing care for the youngest children. Grandparents, usually relied on in such situations, could not be of help then, because they are a group particularly vulnerable when exposed to the coronavirus infection. "The

increased risk of COVID-19 for the elderly in many families resulted in the decision to limit contacts with grandparents, aunts and uncles who, before the pandemic, naturally supported their children and relatives in raising the next generations, sometimes running entire households of their relatives. At the same time, parents took over a significant part of the duties of teachers, educators and peers of their children – it is worth recalling that periodically during a pandemic, restrictions are introduced prohibiting the free movement of minors without the presence of legal guardians." (Ambroziak, 2020, p. 8). Parents were often left on their own, therefore, and had to resort to taking a leave, sick-leave or the so-called idle time benefit, if the employer provided such a form of support. According to the respondents, this last solution was the most advantageous, because it gave the possibility of staying at home while obtaining a small, but still steady income. *I found the idle time benefit really helpful. True, the money was very small* (80% of the minimum wage – author's note), *but it was there and I could stay at home to look after the children. My husband wasn't in such a comfortable position and had to work from home, which was sometimes very difficult in the limited space we have* (W3, F-39, waitress, K3). However, not everyone could afford to stay at home – this was particularly inconvenient for the parents of the youngest children. The situation was so difficult sometimes that parents decided to go on sick leave in order to be able to care for their children. Such solution, though short-lived, provided some respite, though for many it meant problems at the workplace. *My coworkers blamed me for taking L-4* (sick leave – author's note) *and the fact that they had to take over my duties. However, I really had no other choice – I had used up my holiday leave, my parents and in-laws are ailing, my husband had to go to work to avoid major financial problems. (…). After my return from*

the sick leave, the atmosphere at the office was hostile, my colleagues showed their dissatisfaction with me at every turn. (…). It's a little better now, but I resent their lack of understanding for my difficult situation (W4, F-34, clerk, K2). Such situations – as the author's observations demonstrate – were not uncommon. Professionally active parents of the youngest children experienced serious problems with providing care for them and fulfilling their roles as employees. An attempt to effectively fulfil the role of an employee often equated to a failure to fulfil the family role and vice versa. Striving to reconcile many roles often led to improper performance of each of them, distraction, and even a sense of failure.

Strain-based conflict is frequently associated with the conflict of roles, in which emotions and tensions in one area are transferred to other spheres of life. For example, occupational stress – its impact and consequences – can be transferred into the private life, exerting a destructive impact on it. It is closely related to the difficulty in separating professional and personal life as well as to the mutual influences between these two spheres. "**Role** overload happens when the quantity and wide variety of different **roles** expected of the focal person is overwhelming to the point that no one **role** can be performed satisfactorily. Underutilization-of-skills-related tension occurs when the expectations of the focal person do not allow him/her to use his/her unique skills and abilities--a type of **role** underload." (Scheib, 2003, p. 125–126). The Covid-19 pandemic blurred these boundaries even more. While research on work-personal life balance most often demonstrates the negative impact of work on non-professional life, in the case of the pandemic, the opposite was true. The lockdown caused family life to significantly influence work. The necessity to simultaneously carry out many home and work duties in one limited space created a specific

strain frequently manifested by nervousness, increased level of occupational stress, absentmindedness, depressed mood, and even depression. *At a certain point, I felt that I would not be able to continue performing my professional work and looking after three young children (…). My husband, a driver, was constantly on the road, and I struggled with the hardships of everyday life. This was accompanied by a permanent fear for the health of my loved ones as well as my own. I greeted each day with my heart pounding with terror and ended it crying into my pillow. (…). It was really bad. Fortunately, my sister, seeing what was happening to me, moved in and supported me* (W5, F-33, accountant, K3). There were many such situations, as declared by the respondents. They were particularly severe in the case of parents who had to run the household alone on a daily basis. Strain-based conflict was extremely frequent here, felt by everybody around. It should be emphasised that any imbalances between personal and professional life affect not only the employee, but also all the people around. The negative consequences of the work-life conflict are severe and, for many, long-lasting. "Recent conceptual and empirical research has also recognized the possibility that work stressors and strain can translate into domestic problems as evidenced by the developing literature on crossover stress and strain." (Carnes, 2017, p. 153). The sense of unfulfillment and failure casts a shadow over the assessment of the entirety of one's functioning. Strain results not only in the inability to fulfil the many roles, but also in the emergence of psychosomatic problems: discouragement, stress, somatic symptoms in the form of stomach problems, hypertension, immunological compromise. Long-term exposure to strain-based conflict brings irreversible effects in the spheres of health and psycho-emotional life as well as social one. These consequences translate into measurable losses in the form of sickness

absences, economic difficulties, problems in family and social relations, emotional distress, and professional burnout. The time of the pandemic is not only marked by the anxiety for health – one's own and of the others – but also by the need to adapt to daily functioning in very difficult conditions.

Conflict of space/equipment – organisational and logistical problems

The problem of combining distance working and learning is not limited to the sense of being overburdened and helpless. It also involves conflicts due to the limited availability of space and equipment. *Sometimes I had to work in the bathroom, because all the rooms were occupied and only there I could focus on business tasks.* (W21, M43, financial advisor, K3). Both working remotely and distance learning require the use of appropriate equipment and permanent internet access. Problems arise when many members of the family (household) need such equipment at the same time. The respondents emphasised that the issue providing place for work and classes concerned mainly – at least at the initial stage – the issue of available equipment, which they often lacked. This brought about stress, frustration and concerns about the ability to function efficiently in the virtual reality necessitated by the pandemic. *In our case, grandparents came to the rescue and gave their grandchildren an earlier birthday present, buying them tablets for distance learning. (…). But for their generosity, we would have to reach for our rainy day savings, which would be the last resort* (W9, F37, shop assistant, K2). Providing the right amount of equipment and adequate internet access became a serious challenge for many Polish households. Some schools offered their students the possibility of borrowing equipment to use at home, but the quantity

was insufficient. Consequently, in many families, some of the children had to forgo part of their lessons to make place for their siblings. *We didn't have a problem with the hardware, but the internet connection sometimes failed. (…) Neighbours, who have 5 school-age children, had a problem, because they did not have enough computers and laptops, and often the youngest children did not attend lessons. Later, the municipality bought laptops and made them available to those most in need, including my neighbours* (W8, M42, bank employee, K2).

Aware of the problem, many institutions and individuals undertook initiatives aimed at providing logistical support to families in need. These campaigns consisted in providing computer equipment and ensuring access to high-speed internet. In many cases, however, the latter problem was unsolvable – particularly in small towns in the east of Poland, which are not as yet covered by high-speed internet network. For obvious reasons, these shortages caused difficulties in the timely implementation of the teaching program and thus the inability to complete the core curriculum. Among the problems frequently mentioned by the respondents, there were problems with e-learning platforms, unprepared for such overload, as well as the inability to apply the tools offered by these platforms on the part of both teachers and students. Over time, in most cases, logistical problems were successfully solved, but they constituted a major problem at the initial stage of the lockdown, destructively impacting the balance between work and personal life.

The time of the pandemic also demonstrated the importance of private space to be used for work or study. It was not uncommon to conduct online meetings from the garage, bathroom and even wardrobe, for example. The problem of organising and adapting space was a challenge for the parents of distance learning students, both with respect to the

children and themselves – so that they could perform their home office duties. Here, there were frictions and tensions as well, generating conflicts. Spatial limitations were more difficult to solve than problems with the equipment and the internet. In many cases, grandparents also came to the rescue, providing – as much as they could – space for remote learning. Logistical and organisational problems contributed significantly to conflicts in many Polish homes and considerably influenced the quality of remote work and education.

Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic and the related lockdown have demonstrated how difficult it is to balance work and private life. The boundary between these two spheres blurred, which aggravated the existing, more or less intense conflicts of time, as well as strain connected with performing various roles. This resulted in the disturbance of family and business relationships, as well as in the need to redefine priorities in life. Families with school-age children had to adapt both their daily schedules and space organisation to the needs of distance learning. Parents, on the other hand, created a makeshift home office so as to continue to actively perform their professional duties. However, the situation was the most difficult for those who, for various reasons, could not perform their work remotely – they faced the challenge of combining childcare with the necessity to ensure further financial liquidity.

Respondents noted that their functioning during the lockdown was focused on balancing family and work responsibilities as efficiently as possible. In interviews, they often reported that they had to get through this time somehow and coped with their duties in different ways. They also felt differently about the problems arising from having to balance family and work life. Considering the survey

analysis, it is possible to distinguish four basic types of strategies that respondents represented during the Covid-19 pandemic:

▸ "Good organization" – efficient remote learning, access to efficient equipment, time management, mutual support.
▸ "Until Friday" – focusing on the most urgent tasks and postponing less important ones until the weekend.
▸ "Night work" – postponing professional tasks and household duties to late evening and night.
▸ "It will be somehow" – lack of detailed organization, reacting to emerging problems, working "day to day".

The beginnings of functioning in the pandemic reality were very difficult. However, most problems – especially those of a logistical nature – were successfully resolved with time. Many employees and employers have recognised the advantages of remote work and declare that it will be continued, if possible, even after the pandemic has ended. Observations and statistics also show that the lockdown had a significant impact on family relationships. Sometimes, family members rediscovered the joy of spending time together and deepened their bonds. The pandemic, however, showed, as in a lens, that in some cases people are unable to communicate and coexist in one space. "Isolation, stress related to fear for one's health, often problems with losing a job and lack of funds to support the family contributed to an increase in the level of physical and verbal aggression as well as psychological, sexual and financial violence." (Skrabacz, 2021, p. 24–25). Polish police statistics show that during the spring lockdown, the rate of domestic violence increased significantly. The number of such cases reported almost tripled. Fears and frustrations related to the necessity of functioning in the reality of the pandemic increased the level of dissatisfaction and aggression in some

people, resulting in domestic violence.[3] The statistics of filed divorce petitions also showed how difficult the period was for many married couples – in Poland, during the period of compulsory quarantine, the number of applications for divorce mediation doubled.[4]

Maintaining a balance between personal and professional life during the Covid-19 pandemic is definitely more difficult than normal. This is exemplified by the need to work remotely from home, with a limited space shared by the spheres of work and private life. Also, manoeuvring between working hours and time off work is highly difficult. Often, due to the breaks forced by childcare or household chores, remote work is spread over time. It can also be noticed that household chores, which had previously been performed in a certain order and regularity, started to be postponed until later, because remote work became a priority. In many cases, the pandemic has revealed or exacerbated the conflict between roles and the strain connected with performing them. This is particularly evident when it is necessary to simultaneously act as an employee and a parent, spouse, etc. It seems that the lockdown has shown how much remains to be done in terms of reconciling work and personal life, and that some solutions, such as home office, can improve or worsen the situation. The ability to separate these two spheres and prevent them from penetrating one another is perhaps the greatest challenge for today's employees. ◉

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Główne zainteresowania naukowe koncentrują się wokół socjologii pracy, socjologii rodziny oraz socjologii konsumpcji.   Autorka monografii: „Życie rodzinne w sferze zawodów wysokiego ryzyka. Na przykładzie zawodu policjanta". Współautorka monografii: „Od żony górnika do naukowca. Zmiana systemu wartości ról społecznych kobiet na terenach poprzemysłowych Górnego Śląska"; „Emigracja jako doświadczenie Studium na przykładzie migrantów powrotnych do województwa śląskiego". Autorka i współautorka polskich i zagranicznych artykułów, współredaktor monografii oraz członkini międzynarodowych projektów badawczych.

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Równowaga między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym w czasie pandemii Covid-19 – analiza sytuacji rodzinnej i zawodowej polskich rodziców

Abstrakt

Trudność godzenia ról zawodowych i osobistych jest wyzwaniem codzienności. Pandemia Covid-19 pokazała, że może być ono jeszcze trudniejsze. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zaprezentowanie wyników badań nt. próby utrzymania równowagi między pracą a życiem pozazawodowym w trakcie pandemii Covid-19. Zaprezentowane zostaną problemy, z jakimi zetknęli się rodzice dzieci, które uczyły się zdalnie w domu. Analiza została oparta o kilka głównych problemów, z jakimi mierzyli się respondenci: konfliktu czasu, konfliktu miejsca oraz konfliktu roli. Efektem podjętych badań jest typologia strategii codziennego funkcjonowania, jakie wypracowali rodzice w trakcie pandemii Covid-19.

Słowa kluczowe: lockdown, nauczanie zdalne, pandemia Covid-19, praca zdalna, równowaga praca-życie.