

**Drowning or thriving while working from home in a pandemic:  
Do politics and country matter?**

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Drowning or thriving while working from home in pandemic: Do politics and country matter?

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the workplace landscape across the globe. Many employees have been working remotely as a result of government-mandated closures, stay-at-home orders, and businesses' concerns for the health and safety of their employees and customers (Bick, Blandin & Mertens, 2020). The foreseeable future of office work seems to involve at least some level of working from home (WFH), which includes greater reliance on technology (e.g., Zoom, Skype) and managing family and work life under the same roof. Those who have lost their jobs might consider the ones who are working from home to be privileged. Nevertheless, there has been an outcry in the news and on social media about the challenges of working from home (e.g., Streitfeld, 2020). This unprecedented and unexpected change in the immediate environment of working adults has placed management scholars outside of the previously taken-for-granted assumptions about the workplace, where the traditional work environment (e.g., office, desks, face-to-face meetings with coworkers and supervisors) may have become a boundary condition of the past.

As if this is not enough, many nations have been experiencing a deepening political divide, where every newsworthy issue ranging from wearing a mask, joining BLM protests, to sending children back to school has been politicized. On top of the within-country politics, nations have entered the COVID-19 Olympics, where individuals around the world are updated daily on the number of new cases and where each country ranks against one another.

In approaching this new environment, a reasonable point of entry into understanding WFH during the Covid-19 pandemic is: How are the employees doing? That is, how is the changing workplace environment affecting the psychological well-being of employees? Additionally, given the salience of politics in all aspects of our lives, do political views affect employees' WFH experiences? Finally, are there cross-national differences employees' WFH experiences?

To understand the effect of WFH on employees' well-being, we investigated the role of WFH, political view, and country on employee psychological depletion. We collected data from working adults in the US and South Korea. Although a vast majority of remote work or telework research has found that WFH improves worker well-being (Anderson, Kaplan, & Vega, 2015), some researchers have found that WFH can hurt employees if they perceive little personal control over their situation (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006).

The Covid-19 pandemic forced workers into new environments quickly, often without time for proper training or technological support. Furthermore, spouses and children were also forced to work/learn from home. Together, these factors created a more complex WFH environment that provided employees with very little opportunity to control the location, timing, and process of their work experience. Thus, we expected that a higher percentage of time spent WFH in the pandemic will lead to a higher level of work overload and psychological depletion.

Furthermore, we expected that conservatives will suffer more as the government-imposed restrictions that have forced them into their WFH situations may make them feel that their individual rights and boundaries have been invaded. In general, conservatives value free markets and individualism (McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Swigart et al., In Press) and thus the unwanted government interference is likely to exacerbate the perceived demands and depletion resulting from their new work environment. On the contrary, we expected that liberals will be less affected by the new work environment, as the government-imposed restrictions may make them feel supported and protected. In general, liberals value social justice, equality, and market controls

(Jost, 2006; Swigaart et al., In Press). The government interference to protect people is likely to reduce the perceived demands and depletion resulting from their new work environment. Finally, we expected that these relationships will be more pronounced in the US, given the palpable political divide and the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic situation compared to South Korea.

Data were collected at the end of May of 2020 in the US and in early June in Korea. The two countries announced their first COVID-19 case on the same day, which was 20<sup>th</sup> of January. The data were therefore collected about 4-4.5 months after the first outbreak of COVID-19 case within the respective countries. The US data were collected through M-Turk. The Korean participants were recruited through a major corporate training company. Complete data were available for 437 from the US and 138 from South Korea.

The results were surprising and contrary to what we expected. The percentage of working hours spent working from home was associated with psychological depletion and this relationship was mediated by work overload. Surprisingly, the increase in WFH percentage led to less work overload ( $B = -.12$ ;  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and the reduction in turn, led to less psychological depletion ( $B = .64$ ;  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The association between WFH percentage and work overload was moderated by political view ( $B = -.09$ ;  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The pattern of the interaction was also unexpected, in that the relationship was negative for liberals ( $B = -.22$ ;  $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but non-significant for conservatives ( $B = -.02$ ;  $SE = .07$ , *n.s.*).

We further tested for cross-national differences for the moderated mediation. There was no significant country-level difference in the first stage. The association between WFH percentage and work overload was significant for liberals in both countries ( $B_{Korea-Liberal} = -.27$ ;  $SE = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $B_{US-Liberal} = -.21$   $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but non-significant for conservatives ( $B_{Korea-Conservative} = -.07$ ;  $SE = .12$ , *n.s.*;  $B_{US-Conservative} = -.01$   $SE = .08$ , *n.s.*).

The link between work overload and psychological depletion was moderated by country. The effect was stronger for the US participants ( $B = .64$ ;  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ) compared the Korean participants ( $B = .43$ ;  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, the conditional effects were positive and significant for both countries, illustrating that the positive relationship between work overload and depletion existed in both countries. Finally, the indirect effect was significant for liberals in both countries ( $B_{Korea-Liberal} = -.12$ ;  $SE$  (Boot) = .05, bias-corrected CI = [-.24, -.03];  $B_{US-Liberal} = -.14$ ;  $SE$  (Boot) = .05, bias-corrected CI = [-.24, -.04]), but non-significant for conservatives ( $B_{Korea-Conservative} = -.03$ ;  $SE = .05$ , bias-corrected CI = [-.13, .05].;  $B_{US-Conservative} = -.01$ ,  $SE = .05$ , bias-corrected CI = [-.12, .10]) using 5,000 bootstrap samples.

Together, the results provide three surprising findings. First, on average, a higher percentage of time spent working from home led to lower work overload and psychological depletion, controlling for gender, age, number of children, post-pandemic income change, total work hours, and pre-pandemic WFH percentage. With the prevalence of news articles and anecdotes testifying to the challenges of working from home, this result was contrary to what we expected. This may be illustrating, at least partially, the deepening inequality between the “essential workers” and those fortunate enough to transition into WFH during the pandemic situation. Researchers have found that highly educated, high-income, and white individuals have been more likely to maintain employment and to shift to remote work following the virus outbreak (Bick, Blandin & Mertens, 2020). It appears that the such inequality is stretching beyond the possibility of WHF itself.

Second, the liberals seem to have benefited from WFH, while conservatives did not. Specifically, the indirect effect of WFH percentage to lower psychological depletion (through lower work overload) was more pronounced for liberals. While our results provide some hint

towards the mechanisms (i.e., lower work overload), we are still puzzled as to why liberals are reporting less work overload and depletion with greater percentage of time spent WFH. There are myriad potential explanations, all of which are purely speculation at this point and warrant attention in future research. For example, one possible explanation could be that liberals, due to their tendency to support a communal society (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1990; Jost et al., 2006; Swigart et al., In Press), may have engaged in more extra-role performance behaviors or backing-up behaviors in the face-to-face work situation. With the transition to WFH, they may have been less exposed to others' needs and therefore have had fewer opportunities to engage in such behaviors, leading to less work overload.

Another potential explanation could be that conservatives are less capable of coping with such an untraditional work arrangement, as they tend to value traditionalism (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1990; Jost et al., 2009; Swigart et al., In Press). Such tendency may have inhibited their ability to swiftly adapt to the new environment that requires working from a home office and mixing work and family life may. Furthermore, as noted earlier, given their emphasis on personal agency or individualism (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1990; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Jost et al., 2009; McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Swigart et al., In Press), they may have felt more pressure to deal with the situation individually, rather than communally. Together, these tendencies may have prevented them from reaping the benefits of the flexible new work environment. Liberals, on the other hand, support social changes and government involvement and tend to emphasize contextual factors for explaining situations (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1990; Jost et al., 2009; Swigart et al., In Press) They may have been relatively more comfortable with the sudden changes and better able to seek support or deflect pressure, thus allowing them to reap the benefits of the flexible new environment.

These are speculations only as our data were cross-sectional and did not contain measures capturing these mechanisms. Future research is needed to fully understand the mechanisms linking WFH to psychological depletion across political affiliations. More importantly, in general, we need to better understand the role of political views in the workplace (e.g., Roth et al., 2017; 2020), to enable theory-based prediction or inference about the role of politics in future research.

Third, despite the difference in the national cultures and the government and social response to COVID-19, there was no meaningful country-level difference in the findings. It is important to note that South Korea, although it was among one of the first countries to experience a spike in the number of cases, has never issued a lock-down during the pandemic. Indeed, in our study, there was a significant mean difference between the two countries in the percentage of WFH hours ( $M_{\text{Korea}} = 16.00$ ,  $SD = 24$ ,  $M_{\text{US}} = 59.70$ ,  $SD = 39.28$ ,  $t_{650} = 14.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ). At the moment, South Korea is considered one of the few success cases of handling the outbreak, while the US is witnessing a second wave, record-breaking daily cases, and re-closing down of states. While we may not be able to generalize these findings based on the fact that we only examined two countries, it is noteworthy that the two countries which are at opposite ends of the spectrum handling the COVID-19 pandemic produced similar results. The implications of political views in the midst of the pandemic may be more generalizable internationally.

Given the rapidly changing economic, political, and international environment, we do not know if our findings will hold when situations change. Nonetheless, we hope that our research provides a platform for future research on WFH during the pandemic, or similar global crises. We also hope that our research may inform corporate leaders and policy makers on the downstream implications of WFH measures beyond the prevention of COVID-19.

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