Hitting the Breaks While Working from Home. Changes in Taking-Breaks Behaviours During Pandemic Lockdowns.[1]

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Hitting the Breaks While Working from Home. Changes in Taking-Breaks Behaviours during Pandemic Lockdowns. During the 2020 Spring lockdown, here was an increase in working from home incidence. For many it was a premiere, others have had previous experience with the phenomena, but all needed to manage post/during pandemic work recovery and micro-breaks. The latter were particularly important, as typical communication points that increase permeability of work-life boundaries. We inspect changes in taking within-day work-breaks while working from home, by comparing web surveys collected in 2018 and during 2020 lockdowns in Romania. We argue that frequency of taking breaks was dependent on work-related constraints including total working time, and life-related agents, such as the presence of children. The findings indicate moderating effects of number of children, time spent working, and education. The main changes refer to the type of breaks, not their frequency.

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Key words: *Working from home; Covid-19 pandemic; within-day work breaks; work-family interference; working time, boundary-management*

Introduction

With still a core element for the societal organization of human life, the idea of work, along with its patterns and values, has kept changing since 1970s (Voicu 2022). This transformation entails a shift in work ethics, which may lead to

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challenges for individuals accustomed to prioritizing work and relying on it to establish structure in their daily lives (Strangleman 2012) considering these changes. Along with working fewer hours per week, cultural changes lead nowadays to less importance to work and its extrinsic outcomes as compared to the past and giving priority to other life domains. Flexible working arrangements are one of the responses. In this context, working from home became a regular arrangement a few decades ago (Allen et al. 2015; Brynjolfsson et al. 2020; Fonner – Stache 2012; van der Lippe – Lippényi 2020), as a flexible work pattern, reflecting the need to better balance work and other aspects of life, and to adapt the working conditions to individual preferences and constraints, with beneficial effects in terms of personal wellbeing (Felstead – Jewson 2002; Pinsonneault – Boisvert 2001; Gajendran – Harrison 2007). However, aprubtly adopting working from home may come with its costs and learning to deal with working-from-home (WfH) is in itself a process.

For instance, people who started to work from home during the Spring 2020 lockdown(s) have faced sudden and intense changes: they had to swiftly adapt to new work-life setups (Guest et al. 2022), and to the supplementary stress of using technology to facilitate work and communication (Aleksić et al. 2023). Even those already working from home in the beginning of 2020 had to adjust their behaviour to a limited choice with respect to other activities, dealing with other family members being at home during the day, not being able to do usual errands, etc. An 'always-on' work-culture emerged, with online meeting conflicting with the rest of life, and leaving little leeway for organizing daily routine (Sun et al. 2022).

Beyond pandemics, WfH encompasses serios time management challenges (Felstead – Jewson 2002). Freed from the constraints of a formal working space (Fonner – Stache 2012), people must deal with managing family-related interruptions (Kossek et al. 2006), and along with the freedom of choosing when to take a break (Wöhrmann – Ebner 2021), they face the challenge of managing time boundaries between work and other parts of life. However, there is still the pressure of working as constraint imposed by the salience of work as social norm, which leads to difficulties to manage time, as exercise of boundary setting. The work-life interplay in the case of WfH is actually a continuous dialogue devoted to boundary management (Ashforth et al. 2000; Fonner – Stache 2012; Zhang et al. 2020). Daily transitions from micro-roles in each domain define the boundary crossings. Taking breaks, the object of interest for our study, is seen as part of time management and subject of setting symbolic barriers between work and other life domains.

We focus on taking breaks while working from home during Covid-19 lockdowns, a genuine experiment in which managing time become essential, given that space constraints were a priori imposed. We set up our research

questions within this pandemic context, by asking whether time spent working and potential disruptions (children, spouses, lack of experience with working from home, lack of space) influence the frequency of taking breaks. To explore the hypotheses, we employ a repeated non-probabilistic survey of Romanian teleworkers. The online survey has the advantage of being carried out in two waves, firstly in 2018 and secondly during Spring 2020 lockdown. The survey was collected spreading the news over Facebook accounts and has no aim for representativeness and mapping the situation. The fast and flexible data collection allowed instead testing for relationships, helping the conceptual refinement on an urgent topic. The dependent variable refers to how often the respondents take breaks. Defining what "break" means remained a matter of personal choice in the case of each respondent. Our interest is to observe how frequent the event of interrupting the work occurs, and we were less interested in the exact definition of break. Regression models were employed to isolate the tested effects while controlling for basic characteristics of respondents. They were run under different measurement assumptions (ordered logit, OLS, probit), and with different controls, to check for robustness of the findings. The results have provided partial support for the hypotheses and revealed that breaks' structure changed during lockdown by type of break.

Literature review and hypotheses

There are three phenomena that need elaboration in this section. One refers to taking breaks during work. The other refers to changes due to working from home. The third is the pandemic condition which instantaneously change the working place during lockdown. Our research question deals with all three phenomena; therefore, they need to be discussed considering their interplay.

Breaks include various intended or unintended interruptions from paid work, of different length, but short enough to keep working time compact. Such interruptions are called by various names: interruptions, work breaks, micro-breaks, rest breaks, etc. (Albulescu et al. 2022: 2). Taking regular breaks during working is an essential part of maintaining mental and physical health, work motivation, job efficiency etc. (Albulescu et al. 2022; Bosch et al. 2017; Hunter et al. 2016; Kim et al. 2018; Lyubykh et al. 2022; Nie et al. 2021; Zhu et al. 2018). Relaxing, relatedness, and psychological recovery from work stressors are among the positive externalities. This creates a playground for discussing the frequency of taking breaks, that is likely to determine the positive impact of such interruptions. Research also revealed downsides, showing, for instance, that mini breaks for small talk are beneficial in terms of uplifting effects, but also deter the capacity to cognitively focus on the existing working tasks (Methot et al. 2021). This does not diminish the importance of studying

the frequency of taking breaks but stresses the need to understand first whether they are taken and if how frequent they are.

In case of working from home, taking breaks is seldomly researched in the context of working from home in general (Allen et al. 2015: 61). In their review of 63 papers on remote e-working effects on well-being at work, Charalampous et al. (2018) do not report any study that considers taking breaks as variable of interest. However, investigating breaks in the context of working from home is needed, such as in relation to family-interference and to transfers of ways of doing from work to family life (Lyubykh et al. 2022: 36). Taking breaks was shown to be less frequent in terms of number of hours between breaks and number of breaks per working-day (Darouei – Pluut 2021). This was partly due to escaping distractions and interruptions inflicted by co-workers (Fonner – Roloff 2010). Also, people working from home may work long hours (Grant et al. 2013), that are difficult to break due to organizational cultures or societal norms that instil the need to be always responsive, irrespective of the time of the day (Derks et al. 2015; Kossek et al. 2009).

The topic is also almost unexplored in the light of Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, reviewing 40 papers dealing with work-from-home during Covid-19, Shirmohammadi et al. (2022) make no mention to taking-breaks. Exceptions include Wood (2022) that uses taking breaks as one of the dependent variables and reports a decreasing trend in taking breaks among academics as the pandemic progressed. A couple of papers (Cropley et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2020) consider taking breaks as an independent or mediating variable, and some report lack of social breaks as part of lockdown consequences (Karatuna et al. 2022; Sun et al. 2022). However, most papers dealing with working from home during pandemic context do not even mention taking breaks, even though many of them discuss the disruption due to crossing the work-life boundary. In this context, it is likely that the lack of studies on this topic during the Covid-19 pandemic reflects a lack of data on taking breaks for teleworkers, but also a concern about wider societal changes over work-related processes. Breaks also mark the boundary between work and non-work life, allowing connections in the intertwined daily life routines. In case of working from home, this is of particular importance, since the homeworker is exposed to the constant challenges provided by families. In many instances, control over own schedule proves to be difficult (Allen et al. 2015). Working from home becomes a game of boundary management (Kossek et al. 2006; Fonner – Stache 2012), during which one needs to navigate between work stressors, work duties, family duties, and various types of interruptions. Breaks take form of a boundary-crossing tool that mediates symbolic and spatial understanding of work and non-work life placed in the same physical space.

However, setting boundaries, from a critical perspective, is seen as just another facet of a power-driven relationships (Hochschild 1997; Fleming – Spicer 2003). Cynicism is argued to be a coping strategy, in which workers develop a self-representation of being autonomous, but in fact follow rules and habits imposed by the working environment. Wöhrmann and Ebner (2021: 353) reckon that autonomy in time management "carry the risk of undermining the legislation regarding the length of working hours and taking breaks". This is due to personal difficulties to monitor actual work schedule, and to the risk of self-exploitation. Therefore, the prevalence of work in everyday life still functions as a strong social norm (Voicu 2022). To escape the influence of job duties, and implicitly to manage breaks, means to rationalize and to break the norm. Even when no formal supervisor is around, such in the case of WfH, putting limits requires effort, along with a certain habitus, knowledge, and power to set boundaries, or with external constraints that lead to imposing breaks as boundaries. All these effortful practices for WfH employees to set boundaries reinforce the overall pervasiveness of work in private lives, even though the very act of putting limits implies a certain resistance. Working from home continuation has the role of making the workforce ubiquitous, despite the spatial limits of workplaces (Fleming – Spicer 2004). Furthermore, boundaries become more difficult to sustain effectively in contexts of overworked cultures (Creary – Locke 2022) or in organizational environments that tend to create leisurely or family practices, discussions, and activities (Fleming – Spicer 2004). Let note that boundaries have a multiplicity of understandings (Fleming – Spicer 2004). They can be related to interruptions of workflows, to particular allocations of time between work and non-work, they can be present in how identities build separated from or inclusive of work (Fleming – Spicer 2003, 2004), or they simply imply physical separation between work and family/ private space. For the intentions of this paper, we treat only the taking breaks side of setting boundaries.

Following insight from the boundary management literature (Ashforth et al. 2000; Fonner – Stache 2012), we argue that breaks act as boundaries between job-duties and non-work life, and that they face resilience from dominant social norms of prevailing importance of work. In the context of WfH, the permeability of the boundaries between work and private life depends on work-related factors, such as time devoted to work, and external agents, including the presence of children and family. We seek to investigate whether total working time, presence of children, marital status, and previous experience with working-from-home mattered in determining the frequencies of taking breaks during Covid-19 lockdowns in Spring 2020. Using existing literature, we structure four hypotheses, stating that time constraints as an expression of the social norm of work prevalence decrease the number of breaks; for similar

reasons, lockdown is associated with lower propensity to take breaks; family inference acts as buffer and leads to more breaks; previous experience with working-from-home is associated to better break-management.

It is easy to imagine feeling the pressure to work, in particular when not seen by others, and facing difficulties to stop (Glass – Noonan 2016). As already argued, this is likely to lead to a treadmill that push people towards more and more work, and the more work one does and the longer the working hours, the pressure is likely to build and to lead to less willingness to take breaks and having a constant urgency to end tasks by the end of the day. Existing literature clearly points towards a tendency of those working from home to resent a real time pressure, and to work longer hours and longer days and weeks (Wöhrmann – Ebner 2021). They tend to extend their working time into evenings, nights, and weekends, as well into holidays. Ignoring the need to take breaks should immediately follow, in particular when the overworking is more intense, as stated by H1.

H1: *Taking breaks depends on how much one works:*
the more one works, the less frequent the breaks (time constraints)

Things become more complex when working from home is triggered by an unexpected event such as *a global pandemic* (Zhang et al. 2020), and rules for taking breaks may swiftly change. A retrospective view of 2020 events shows that technology and digitalization were in the focus of the entire society, becoming salient during early lockdowns (Dey et al. 2020; Kutnjak 2021). Everything became (more) digital. Shopping, health care, schooling, training, partying, most relationships, everything had to move online overnight. Such a 'condensed' change (Demertzis – Eyerman 2020) is stressful in itself. For most, learning to deal with the quick changes added supplementary challenge to the various negative mental health effects of the lockdown (Majumdar et al. 2020; Kim – Lawrence 2020; Țălnar-Naghi 2021). Work itself and all daily routines needed to be reinvented.

In this context, the time pressure resented by those working from home receives a boost. When one suddenly switches to working from home, due to Covid-19 constraints, the result is an even increased strain. The time pressure combines with the novelty of the situation. Those that had previous experience of working from home, are also subject of an increasing stress given the entire societal context in which the respective (time) pressure becomes the norm.

Wood (2022) particularized the issue for academic staff and explained that the lower number of breaks during lockdown and in subsequent months was due to increasing job demands to create the context for online teaching. Less sleep time was also reported during lockdowns, along with less physical

activity, and more time spent in front of computers (Majumdar et al. 2020). In addition, opportunities to take breaks for physical activities, lunching with co-workers, socialization, small chat, even smoking, etc. were less likely to be present.

We are left with the increased time pressure during lockdown; while boundary permeability decreased, we expect taking breaks to become a luxury.

The hypothesis may face challenges from studies indicating a propensity towards procrastination, including delaying the start of activity and taking long social media breaks observed among Chinese interviewees during the Covid-19 pandemic (Wang et al. 2020). However, given the association of procrastination with low workload during this period, its presence is expected to diminish when controlling for the working hours, thereby suggesting the substantiation of H2.

H2: *As compared to pre-pandemic times, taking breaks while teleworking was less frequent during Covid-19 lockdowns due to workload.*

Flexibility and permeability of boundaries determine the extent to which boundaries can be blurred (Clark 2000), and permit interruptions, such as taking breaks. Both depend on within-work specificities and on actions of external agents. The above H2 considers the effect of working hours, as example of within-work constraint. Complementary, we develop H3, which delves with the inference from children, as an outside-work intervention.

Interference of work and family is one of the most frequently discussed issues in the literature devoted to working from home (Allen et al. 2015). Despite working from home reducing the conflict between family and work, (Allen et al. 2015; Gajendran – Harrison 2007), the need to reconcile the two sides remains a potential stressor (Kossek et al. 2006), which manifested plentiful during COVID-19 (Craig – Churchill 2020; Wang et al. 2020). During lockdowns, children were a particular challenge in terms of proper spaces to enable participation in online education, and time for providing food, care, entertainment, family life. The entire care-for-children package automatically implies a need to take breaks more often, hence the third hypothesis:

H3a: *Children act as reason for taking breaks à the more children, the more frequent the breaks.*

H3a is not complete by itself. The presence of children may have a differentiated impact on the frequency of taking breaks and is likely to change the purpose of the break. Instead of taking breaks for chatting with friends or walking, one has a higher propensity to take breaks to care for children, to

cook, entertain the kids, help them with homework, etc. Therefore, in inspecting H3, we also need to consider the type of breaks that one takes.

H3b: *Presence of children changes the structure of breaks, favouring children-related breaks.*

We have already implied in previous paragraphs that one may use previous experience to organize one's WfH strategy, including the capacity to take breaks. Fonner and Stache (2012: 243) note that in the absence of 'boundary management strategies', homeworkers risk having difficulties dealing with typical working-from-home stressors, including family interferences, dealing with non-traditional working hours, separating 'life' and work. Such strategies are usually a biproduct of longer experience with working from home, most likely developed in a trial-and-error iterative process. Experience brings with itself habits, knowledge of the risks, coping strategies that are already settled and they are not in the making. However, for most people, the pandemic came suddenly, and put in place a new reality for which the trial-and-error intermediate stages were simply not possible. The reported enthusiasm in adopting work-from-home (Dubey – Tripathi 2020) might have helped in initial stages, but on long term the already mentioned negative mental health effects reveal potential difficulties. We expect such difficulties to have been lesser with respect to managing taking breaks in the case of those with prior experience in working from home:

H4: *Previous experience with working from home leads to a better time management in terms of taking more frequent breaks.*

To sum up, we have a set of hypotheses, which bring forward pressure as part of social norm (H1), that built as supplementary stressor during lockdowns (H2), was eased in its negative impact on taking breaks too rarely by the presence of children (H3), and by previous experience with WfH (H4).

Methods and data

Our hypotheses were developed with the idea that the constraint to switch to working from home was sudden. Therefore, we use data from a society – Romania – for which the change was radical and had little exposure to work-from-home before the pandemic, which makes it a good context to inspect the impact of such exogenous shock (Țălnar-Naghi 2021). It is also a society that works longer hours than most EU countries: in 2020, on average, one worked 38.8 hours per week in the main job, as contrasted to a European average of

36.0 hours per week, according to Eurostat[8]. In 2019, the corresponding figures were 39.3 for Romania and 36.7 for the EU, while figures for 2021 indicated 39.8 hours for Romania and 36.2 for the EU. Thus, in Romania it is not unusual for many people to work long hours and weeks.

Work-from-Home Romanian Survey comprises two waves of an online survey (2018, and 2020 – during Spring Lockdown), of convenience samples[9]. They include 158 respondents in 2018, respectively 181 in 2020. Most respondents have been referred to the survey via social media (Facebook), mainly using personal accounts. As compared to the general population, the survey respondents tend to be better educated, due to the selection bias induced by having had the survey distributed on social media through the personal networks of the researchers. Therefore, we cannot generalise the findings to the population, but we can examine differences between types of respondents and relationships between variables. Once more, let note that the aim of this paper is to stress changes in relationships between variables, and not to map pre- and post- pandemic descriptives, therefore using such convenience samples is appropriate, and the ambitions from such data should not exceed their potential.

Our dependent variable is a single item ordinal scale, which asks the frequency of taking breaks (Table 1). There is virtually no difference in its distribution before and during pandemic (Figures A-2 and A-3 in the online Appendix), but one should remember that structural effects due to sample composition may occur. Gender, age, location (some respondents were emigrants at time of answering), net income, marital status, number of children, household size, education, and number of worked hours per week from home and in total are the independent variables. Table 2 depicts their variation. One can observe that overall, the two samples refer to Romanians about two times richer than average, quite young, much better educated than average. Some reported working very long hours, but most of the sample reported less than 50 weekly-worked hours in 2018, and less than 60 during lockdown.

Table 1: **Distribution of the dependent variable in the two samples**

Breaks when working from home		WfH2018	WfH2020
1.	not at all	2%	0%
2.	less frequently	36%	37%
3.	**every two hours**	**24%**	**24%**
4.	more often	38%	39%
		100%	100%

For H3b, we mentioned the need to consider the type of breaks by their purposes. A question in the WfH survey allows doing so. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they took breaks for eating, relaxation, entertainment, childcare, housework, rest. For each of the six activities, the respondent could indicate whether they use to take such breaks or not, both in 2018, and in 2020. Each type of activity becomes dependent variable when testing H3b. However, the results should be considered with care: the question on types of breaks was included into an additional module to the web-survey, that respondents could avoid answering. Therefore, the number of valid answers was lower.

Table 2: **Independent and control variables**

Variable	N	mean	SD	min	max
Woman*	337	73%		0	1
Lives in Romania/Moldova*	339	92%		0	1
Age (years)	310	35.6	8.2	20	79
Members in the household	199	2.5	1.1	1	8
Net monthly income (Euro)	274	1351	1469	0	15000
Weekly worked hours	307	41.27	23.42	1	168
Hours worked from home weekly	305	31.65	22.78	1	168
Marital status	338	married (46%), lives with partner (21%), separated/divorced/widowed (8%), never in couple (25%)			
Children	337	none (58%), one (29%), 2 or more (13%)			
Education	337	tertiary non-university (5%), BA (33%), MA (45%), PhD (17%)			
Wave 2020 only					
Weekly worked hours before pandemics	169	37.4	17.3	0	90
Hours worked from home weekly before pandemics	167	12.0	15.9	0	84
Knows someone with Covid	179	33%		0	1
Has personal experience of isolation	179	50%		0	1

*Reference categories: man, lives abroad.

Ordered logit models were set up to inspect the H1-H3a, with the frequency of taking breaks considered as outcome. Alternatively, OLS models were also run, to test the stability of the results.

Several sets of models were set up, including successive interaction effects to account for differences between survey waves, time worked from home, having children, etc. Robustness checks were run by excluding the respondents that estimated exceedingly long weekly worked hours (more than 80, that is more than 11.5 per day, including weekends: Drop-out from filling in the survey led to different response rates per item. Household size is most affected, therefore it is used in only one model, as robustness check. Given space

constraints, only a few tables and graphs are included into the main body of this paper, but more are made available into the online Appendix.

Logit models were set for each type of break indicated above as being relevant for H3b, that deals with the effect of children at home. Given the lower number of cases, instead of three-way-interactions (children × worked hours × survey), we have preferred to run separated models for 2018 and 2020.

For H4, we use only the WfH2020 sample, since the interest is in predicting taking breaks during lockdown conditioned by past experience of work-from-home. Given the lower number of cases, ordered logit, tobit, and OLS models are run to check consistency between estimations. We first fit these models considering all sample, and then we repeat analyses only for those that had previous experience to work from home (we exclude those that use to work 0 hours from home prior to the pandemic).

The non-probabilistic nature of the samples renders obsolete the significance levels. As follows, p-values are presented with indicative purposes, but interpretation of findings is based on the sizes of odds-ratios and on reading the marginal effects.

Findings

The main models are reported in Table 3 Robustness checks were done by excluding those that reported very long worked hours and are reported in the online Appendix (Tables A-1 to A-4 in the online Appendix). Remarkably, these later models are virtually showing the same results as the ones in Table 3.

As mentioned, representativeness is not an issue. If it had been, just a few relations would have turned significant. Being married (as contrasted to being single) is the only consistently significant predictor across models, with those in a married couple being three times less likely to take frequent breaks as compared to those which are single and never been in a couple. Even this relation fades when adding the household size to the model.

However, we focus here on the size of the effects, irrespective of significance levels. With this measure in mind, we observe no impact of income and age on break-taking behaviour, less frequent breaks for women, more breaks for better educated, more breaks for those who are not in a couple, and, among them, for those separated, divorced, or widowed. The models explain 6-7% of the total variation in taking breaks.

The first two hypotheses deal with the frequency of taking breaks depending on total number of worked hours. H2 switches to comparisons across survey waves and requires an interaction effect to be specified. Results are visualised in the upper-left pane of Figure 1, while Figures A-5 and A-6 in the online Appendix provide the robustness checks. In 2018, there is little difference in frequency of taking breaks depending on the number of worked hours from, but those working more tend to decrease their probability to take more frequent

breaks. During lockdown, the situation changes. On average, those working 20-30 hours per week, took breaks more frequently than every two hours, or at least declared to take such breaks. A continuous decrease in taking breaks was estimated while the workload increased. The more hours one worked from home, the higher the likelihood to declare less frequent breaks. This makes H1 valid, in the sense that we have observed a decrease of propensity to take breaks when people work more hours from home, both in 2018 and in 2020. However, the relation did not stand up for those working under 30 hours from home during lockdown.

Table 3: **Ordered-logit models of frequency of taking breaks: pooled 2018 and 2020 samples**

Model	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Income	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Women	0.62	0.59†	0.62	0.68
BA	2.20	3.54	2.23	1.63
MA	1.96	3.21	2.01	1.61
PhD	2.80	4.35†	2.79	2.06
Married	0.30**	0.31**	0.28**	0.45
With partner	0.50	0.51	0.50	0.80
Divorce/separated/widow	2.37	2.47	2.28	4.54†
One child	1.47	1.49	1.15	0.88
2+ children	1.68	1.76	2.02	0.50
Age	0.98	0.98	0.98	0.66
Age^2				1.01
Number of people in the household				1.57*
Lives in Romania	0.58	0.55	0.60	0.65
Total worked hours (weekly)	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.98
Hours worked from home (weekly)	0.99	0.99	0.99	1.00
[hours worked from home (weekly)]^2		1.00	1.00	1.00
WfH2020	1.05	5.49	0.96	0.01
Interaction effects:				
WfH2020 # hours worked from home	1.00			
WfH2020 # BA		0.18		
WfH2020 # MA		0.18		
WfH2020 # PhD		0.20		
WFH2020 # one child			1.69	
WFH2020 # (2+ children)			0.72	
WFH2020 # Age				1.30
WFH2020 # Age^2				1.00
Observations	218	218	218	154
Pseudo R^2	0.064	0.066	0.066	0.076

Exponentiated coefficients. Reference categories: men, no university degree, single, no children, lives abroad, $^\dagger\ p < 0.10$, $^*\ p < 0.05$, $^{**}\ p < 0.01$, $^{***}\ p < 0.001$.

Furthermore, the decrease in the frequency of taking breaks was basically the same in 2018 and 2020, but the situation changed for those working longer

hours and weeks. For instance, the estimated frequency of taking breaks for those that worked 50-60 hours per week from home was the same in 2020 and 2018, ceteris paribus. However, in 2020, those that worked more than such already long hours, had a lower propensity to take frequent breaks as compared to the same self-reported behaviours in 2018.

H3a investigated the effect of the number of children. Irrespective on how we have modelled the effect, it turned out that the effect of the number of children being present in the household is null. The bottom-left pane in Figure 1 illustrates the relation. We observe that there is practically no variation in the estimated frequency of taking breaks depending on the number of children.

However, one may observe differentiations in the structure of breaks. Figure 2 illustrates that the presence of children makes a difference. Full results are displayed in the tables from the online appendix. Having no children is associated with a two times higher likelihood to take breaks for relaxation, and (in 2020 only) with breaks for resting. Having 2+ children, meant in pre-pandemic times higher propensity to take breaks for entertainment. Pandemic times brought mainly an increase in the likelihood to take breaks for childcare, reflecting the simple reality that children also stayed at home.

Figure 1: **Marginal effects on taking breaks (based on OLS models)**
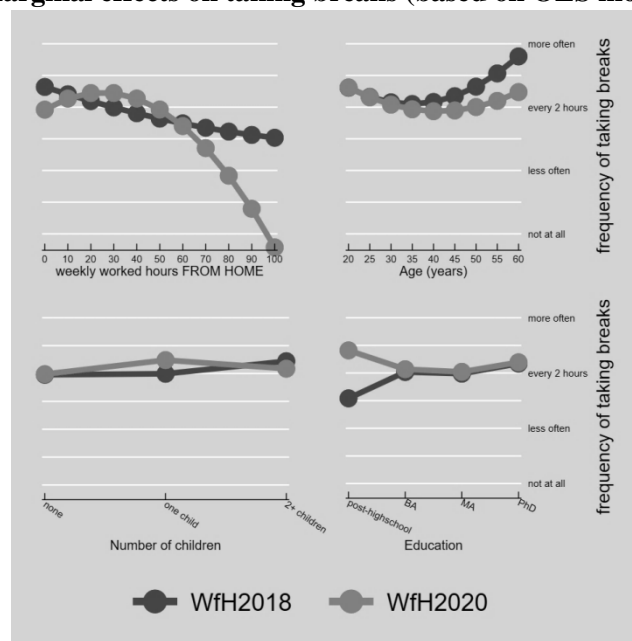
Note: Upper-left pane (worked hours) based on model (1). Upper-right pane (age) is based on model (2). Bottom-left pane (children) is based on model (3). Bottom-right pane (education) is based on model (4).

Studying the interactions between the number of children and the workload (seen as the number of hours worked from home per week) is also meaningful, when comparing the results for 2018 and 2020. Results are displayed in Figure 2, as well as in the online Appendix (Tables A-5 to A-9, and Figure A-7).

Figure 2: **Type of breaks & children: marginal effects based on logit models**
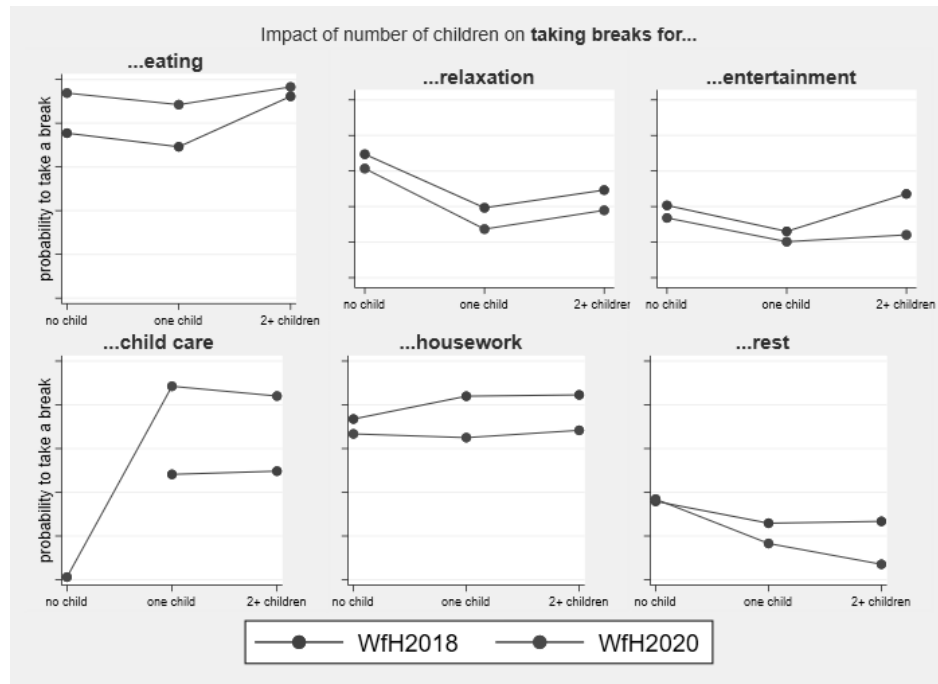
Overall, let us note that lockdown did not change much the relative order of several types of breaks. Eating and housework remained the most important reasons to take a break. For those having children, childcare used to come third, but it became comparable to eating and housework during the pandemic. Entertainment and relaxation are in the middle, while resting is the less often mentioned reason for taking breaks.

Considering *the breaks for eating*, one does not observe any major changes in estimated behaviours. Both in 2018 and 2020, those having two or more children had a higher probability to stop working in order to eat (and probably cook) as compared to those having only a child or no child at all.

Taking *breaks for relaxation* show different patterns during lockdown as compared to pre-pandemic times. Both the workload and the number of children is relevant in this respect. Those having no children had a higher

propensity to take breaks for relaxation both before the pandemic, and during lockdown, *if* working 'normal weeks', which is spending 40 hours or less per week working from home. For these childless people, the likelihood to take breaks for relaxation decrease afterwards with the number of worked hours, but the decrease is twice as big during pandemic times. Those having 2 or more children tend to increase the number of breaks when the workload increases, in particular when working long weeks of more than 50-60 hours worked from home per week. The increase is even more pronounced during the pandemic. Having one child, for those working long weeks, has meant a dramatic decrease in the likelihood of taking breaks for relaxation before the pandemic, a trend maintained but less intense during the lockdown.

The *breaks for entertainment* do not change during the pandemic, and do not depend on the number of children. However, the likelihood of taking breaks for entertainment increases for all categories of respondent when the workload increases.

Taking *breaks for childcare* knows the most spectacular change. Such breaks are irrelevant if not having children. Before the pandemic, for those working 20-40 hours per week from home, having two children implied a higher probability of taking childcare breaks. However, during lockdown, with children being at home anyway, there was no differentiation between having one or more children in the household. Both before and during pandemic, for the same segment of less than 40 hours worked from home per week, there was a decrease in the likelihood of taking breaks when the number of worked hours increased. However, during lockdown, the decrease was less steep than it used to be in 2018. Furthermore, in 2018, when working more than 45 hours per week, having one child was associated to a higher probability of taking childcare breaks than for those having two children or more. During lockdown, the report is dramatically reversed, and the probability to take breaks for childcare increases with the number of worked hours for those with two or more children, while decreasing with the workload for those with only one child.

To sum up, lockdown changed the structure of taking breaks for childcare, and somehow increased the number of breaks for those working longer hours and having more children. The same category remains unprotected, meaning they continue to devote more *breaks to housework*, while for those with one child or none, the likelihood to take breaks for housework decreases during lockdown. In a sense, this is as expected, since the house chores are less numerous, and in the absence of a large family, they are likely to be covered faster if everyone is at home.

Taking *breaks for rest* shows no change between 2018 and 2020 in the observed pattern, and those without children manage to take more such breaks if working longer weeks.

Overall, H3b is validated: the structure of breaks is changing during lockdown. For those with children, childcare becomes more important when working longer hours. Also, for those with two or more children, the increase in relaxation breaks is more likely to occur when working more hours, a phenomenon that is reversed for those with less children or none. This finding would indicate that having more children had a protective role during lockdown, facilitating more breaks.

H4 referred to the experience with working from home. The WfH2020 sample includes 31% respondents with no previous experience to work from home, meaning that the pandemic brought a completely new and revamped work experience for them. The remainder of the sample declared to work between 1 and 84 hours per week from home. The results of fitting OLS, tobit or ordered models reveal similar results, and these results remain stable irrespective of including in the analysis those respondents that hadn't worked at all from home prior to the pandemic.

Figure 3: **Taking breaks during lockdown conditioned by past experience of working from home** (entire WfH2020 sample considered)
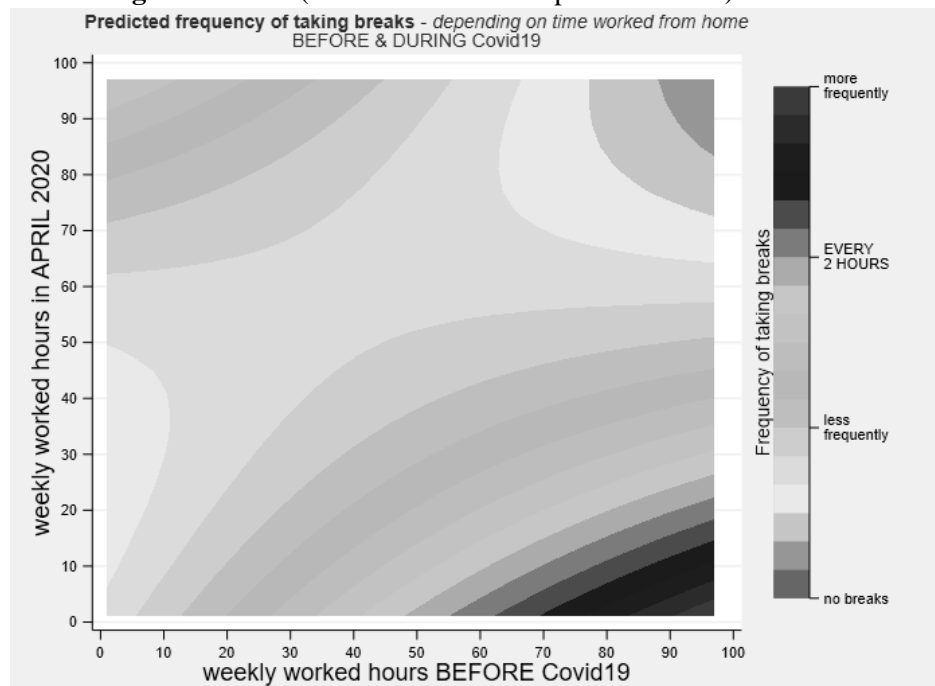
Note: A colourful version is available in the online Appendix.

Tables with full results are available in the online Appendix (Tables A-1 to A-4), while Figure 3 illustrates our main argument. Considering the whole sample, we manage to explain 8% of the variation in the levels of taking breaks. When including only those that used to work at least one hour per week from home, despite reducing the sample size to 77 cases, the explained variance is about 20% (31% in the OLS model). Figure 3 depicts the relations of interest for H4. In the lower-right corner, the darker colours in the graph show a higher probability of taking breaks if the experience to work from home *before* Covid was higher, and they kept working less from home *during* pandemics. In the upper-right corner, a low frequency of taking breaks is visible for those with high work-from-home experience, and high workload during lockdown. However, limited experience with working-from-home leads to lesser ability to take frequent breaks, in particular when working more.

For those aiming to take breaks at least every two hours, the best protective combination proved to be given by the <experience of working longer hours before pandemic time> *and* <less working time during lockdown>. Such reality becomes more visible if Figure 3 is limited to a maximum of 60 hours per week on both axes.

Discussion and conclusions

Our study assessed behaviours of taking breaks and compared the frequency of taking breaks while working from home before and during the pandemic, using a two-waves survey (in 2018−2019, and at the beginning of 2020. We have set out several hypothesis: working longer hours will reduce the frequency of taking breaks (H1); taking breaks was less frequent during pandemic due to workload, (H2); the more children, the more frequent the breaks, while the presence of children affects the structure of breaks (H3); previous experience with WFH leads to a better management around breaks (H4). Our results indicate that those working more tend to decrease their probability to take more frequent breaks. During lockdown, taking breaks continued to depend on the total workload, and those working long weeks/hours had less ability to take frequent breaks. Consistent with Wood (2022), we found a lower propensity of taking breaks during Covid-19. In addition, this proved valid for those with limited or no previous experience of working from home. Those with previous experience in WfH prove to be also more skilled in boundary work reflected in the frequency of breaks during workday.

The findings expand the boundary management approaches (Ashforth 2000; Fonner – Stache 2012), stressing the role of experience in the capacity to delimit work and life. In other words, novices in WfH have lower chances to

classify and simplify life through placing clear boundaries to work, while more practiced ones have higher odds to do it. It could be that employers of workers without previous WfH experience most probably found themselves unable to draft fast efficient WfH policies. Having no prior monitorisation mechanisms for telework, some of them might have overburdened their employees with extra tasks of reporting their actual work, for accountability reasons. At the same time, promoting breaks formally at organisational level might result in employees not respecting official working schedules and hours, as previous results showed (Wöhrmann – Ebner 2021). This could violate labour and employment regulations and pose some risks not only for workers, but also for employers.

Although having children is not associated with an increase in frequency of breaks, having children re-arranges the structure of breaks differently. Our contribution therefore shows that children do intuitively carry with them an important role in the negotiation of work-family boundaries, although not at first visible. Children are less likely to adhere to cultural norms and expectations of work that invade the private spaces of employees, therefore interruptions initiated or mediated by them reflect a struggle between the two spheres, but also a form of resistant family life.

Overall, most of our hypotheses were validated, except for the expectations that children increase propensity to take breaks in general. One may claim that taking breaks implies capacity to put boundaries between work and other parts of life. From this perspective, our findings indicate the need for Romanian employers and employees to reassess the organizational aims and working schedules.

Moreover, our contribution adds to existing knowledge a different boundary approach via taking breaks. The reasons for the breaks reflect competing life-spheres and thus different needs for boundaries. Our results do not necessarily indicate that boundaries are harder to maintain, but that the structure of boundaries mediated by taking breaks changes as the reasons for taking breaks become more diverse.

Such practices might be more frequent in a society with a strong culture of overworking such as Romania. Therefore, further research might be necessary in different types of society. For employers in Romania, the combined need to ensure frequent breaks and perpetuating long working hours becomes a difficult conundrum.

Beyond all potential directions for further research, our contribution to understanding the patterns of taking breaks conditioned by the presence of children and family, as well as by workload, can be beneficial for departments of human resources and for policy makers to refine decisions aimed at boosting

the quality of (work) life, productivity, work-life balance. Further research could also consider the quality of spaces used when working from home, given that during lockdowns (and not only) these spaces were shared with other family members or housemates; our work contributes to building the foundation for breaks as boundary-setting strategies, whether understood as resistance to work as a practice of restoring family life in the context of working from home. Moreover, break-taking activities point to domestic factors, such as the presence of children, which act as barriers to the pervasiveness of work. Along with experience, children contribute to greater resistance to the blurring of boundaries between work and family life and are an indicator for recovery work-life balance. Our study addressed a specific situation, placed in the pandemic context. Benefiting from a two-wave survey, we managed to show that the pandemic shock did not change much of the taking-breaks patterns, in particular for those not living with children. This makes our findings important for the existing knowledge related to taking worktime breaks during teleworking, irrespective of the context.

There are several limitations to our study. First, our dependent variable was not explicit, in the sense that it did not specifically defined breaks, leaving the respondents to work with their subjective definitions. Consequently, we were able to grasp what people think about the frequency of their work interruptions, and we left them the freedom to nominate what is relevant in their situation. Nevertheless, some degree of unintentional breaks is involved by default, and control over working time might differ across individuals. Second, we also do not know to which extent these breaks were restorative with respect to work capacity or they add to its burden. For instance, a child-triggered break could reinvigorate the parent, or simply add to their workload, depending on the nature of the interaction. Such refinements need dedicated analysis and were beyond the scope of this paper. Third, we only had access to a non-probabilistic sample, however, as discussed in the Methods and Data section, this was useful to test relationships. Nevertheless, we have worked with non-probabilistic samples. We are confident that similar results will be obtained from inspecting different other data. However, further testing would be required in order to get insights from different cultures.

Another potential limitation is that we have developed our analysis using data from a society that was in the early stages of adopting working-from-home practices. Further research could be done in societies more experienced with such forms of employment. Better and larger samples would also be useful. They could allow extending the analysis conditioned by available spaces for working-from-home, as well as for the context given by patterns of work and organizing their time as expressed by co-workers. Such patterns are likely to

create opportunities and constraints for workers that need to balance their schedule depending on inputs from others, but also create social norms that could direct behaviours of those exposed to the norm.

The topic is far from being spurious. There are several implications of our results. First, enabling workers from home to use strategies to take adequate breaks is a target for both workers themselves, team-leaders, and organizations, as well as policy makers interested in the well-being of both organizations that employ home-based workers, and of the citizens that work from home. It turned out that during pandemic times there is a risk of overworking, and people may need incentives and models to follow when taking breaks. Second, we know that overworking occurs despite being in the supposedly protective private physical environment provided by own home, where breaks are probably best fitted to be taken, as a natural response to the need of recovery. The pervasive social norm of obligation to working overwrites such advantage and reduces the number of breaks. Under the assumption that not enough breaks decrease wellbeing of workers and their productivity, in terms of efficient models, it turned out that counsellors and team-leaders should concentrate their efforts mainly on those that lack working-from-home experience, and on those that tend to spend very long working-hours and weeks. Third, those with two or more children, could be targeted with incentives to take breaks simply for resting, while their higher propensity for taking relaxations breaks could be used as a vehicle to also increase the frequency of other types of breaks.

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ONLINE APPENDIX

VOICU, B. - NAGHI, D. - NEGUȚ, A. - FLOREA, A. - TUFĂ, L. - GLĂVAN, E. (2023). Hitting the breaks. A comparison of pre-pandemic and lockdown behaviours among Romanian workers from home. Online Appendix: complete statistical models. In Sociológia. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10032068

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