

**Coping with Work and Childcare during COVID-19:  
Exploring Employees' Ability to Balance Work and Caregiving during a Global Pandemic**

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

**Context and background:** Research that examines the impact of COVID-19 on employees' ability to manage work and life demands shows that individuals are facing substantial challenges at both work (Caldas et al., 2021) and home (Fu et al., 2021) as a result of the pandemic. While Canadian employees are doing their best to cope with the myriad of challenges they are facing, not all strategies are effective for maintaining wellbeing and job performance in this period of disruptive change (Shockley et al., 2021). As the imminent threat of a post-COVID mental health crisis looms (Thomas & Romano, 2020) it is critical that we identify strategies and supports that can help Canadian employees cope effectively with the multiple, complex, and evolving challenges they face as they attempt to balance changes in their employment situation and caring conditions during the pandemic.

The present COVID-19 pandemic can be considered an extreme case context for work-life research. Extreme case research occurs when a phenomenon of interest (e.g., work-life interference, stress) takes on extremely high or extremely low values. As Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) point out, extreme case research allows investigators to gather valuable insights that can be generalized to less intense circumstances. Current COVID-19 related restrictions and physical distancing measures have led to exceptional changes to individuals' home and work lives which provide researchers with a unique context for uncovering revelatory and novel findings related to how employed Canadians in general and employed parents in particular cope with work-life challenges.

**Research objectives:** The proposed research seeks to explore how employed Canadians with school-aged children are coping with work-family demands during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our goal is to identify why some employed parents are reporting lower levels of stress than others. We seek answers to 2 questions: (1) How do employed parents cope effectively with the stressors they encounter because of the pandemic? and (2) What impact does context (e.g., type of worker; gender; employer supports, provincial policies) have on which coping strategies are/are not effective?

**Methodology:** The proposed research utilizes a multi-method longitudinal approach grounded in the literature<sup>1</sup> relating to Gender Role Theory, Boundary Theory, Resource Theories and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. In September 2020, my research collaborators (Dr. Linda Duxbury and Dr. Michael Halinski), in partnership with the Conference Board of Canada (CBoFC), initiated an employee wellbeing in times of COVID-19 survey. The survey was comprehensive in nature and included well-established measures to quantify work-family interference (Gutek et al., 1991), perceived stress (Cohen et al., 1983), and other indicators of employee wellbeing. Survey respondents were employed by a diverse number of small, medium and large public, private and non-profit sector employers across Canada. At this point in time there are >17,000 survey responses.

At the end of the CBoFC survey, we asked participants to provide their contact information if they were willing to volunteer to participate in any follow-up initiatives. At the time of this Time Award Application submission, approximately 6,000 survey participants have volunteered. Individuals from this volunteer pool who are in a dual-earner couple and have children under the age of 18 living at home will be invited to partake in a follow-up survey and interview for the proposed study. We will use this selection criteria as research suggests that parents (e.g., Halinski, Duxbury, & Higgins, 2018) and married individuals (Duxbury & Higgins, 2017) have different stressors and supports than their counterparts. We will further structure our sample according to three dimensions from the literature as shown in Table 1.

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<sup>1</sup> A more comprehensive literature review of these topics is available from the applicant upon request.

First, we will use our survey question related to gender to identify the number of men and women in our sample. Second, we will use responses to Cohen et al.'s (1983) perceived stress measure to categorize individuals as either high or low stress. This "polar type" sampling technique (i.e. focusing on high versus low stress groups) will allow us "to more easily observe contrasting patterns in the data" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007. p. 27). Third, we will categorize individuals as either essential frontline workers or emergency teleworkers based on how they responded to another question in the CBoFC survey.

		<b>Man</b>	<b>Woman</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Essential Frontline Worker</b>	<b>High stress</b>	N = 25 (137)	N = 25 (635)	<b>N = 50</b>
	<b>Low Stress</b>	N = 25 (161)	N = 25 (581)	<b>N = 50</b>
<b>Emergency Teleworker</b>	<b>High stress</b>	N = 25 (173)	N = 25 (763)	<b>N = 50</b>
	<b>Low stress</b>	N = 25 (258)	N = 25 (551)	<b>N = 50</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>N = 100</b>	<b>N = 100</b>	<b>N = 200</b>

**Table 1: Desired Sample by Worker Typology**

*Note.* N refers to the number of individuals per category that we are proposing to interview. Number in brackets refers to the minimum number of volunteers in this cell identified in our current dataset.

Qualified volunteers (i.e. meet the desired criteria as outlined in our table above) will be sent a recruitment email asking them to complete a brief pre-interview questionnaire that includes measures that we used in the CBoFC study survey. This second survey will provide meaningful and timely wellbeing data and allow for the fact that some of the variables on interest in this study may have changed over time. Next, the qualitative component of this research will involve the collection and analysis of one-on-one, semi-structured telephone interviews that allow us to gather rich data from people in various roles and situations (Myers, 2019). Interview data will be used to answer the research questions noted above. The interviews will be transcribed, and then coded following content coding techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We intend use our sampling typology to guide the analysis process and use these typology groups to formulate theoretical models using Eisenhardt's (1989) approach to theory building.

## **OUTPUTS**

The primary outputs of the proposed research include three conference presentations, three journal publications, and a findings report for broad dissemination. Findings from this study will provide insights into why some employed parents have coped effectively while others have not during the pandemic and be used to generate specific, timely, practical recommendations targeted at the diversity of stakeholders who have a role to play in enhancing employee wellbeing. Results from this study will also contribute to enhanced public discourse of the role to be played by federal, provincial, municipal, organizational and union policy makers post pandemic in ensuring that families are not just physically healthy but also mentally well. As such we expect that our research can help mitigate the predicted decline in the mental health of employed parents (particularly mothers) post-COVID-19.

The impact of these outputs and the value of the study's findings rely heavily on the quality of the interview data collection. I have recently applied for a SSHRC Insight Development Grant (IDG) as a Principal Investigator (with Dr. Linda Duxbury and Dr. Michael Halinski as co-applicants). These grant funds could help to pay student RAs to conduct, transcribe and code the interviews. Prior to commencing data collection, as the lead on this research, I will need to prepare and submit an ethics application, hire and train the RAs, create communication materials and develop the interview script. The Time Award would allow me to single-mindedly focus on these critical detail oriented and time-consuming tasks.

## **TIMELINE**

The below timeline (see Figure 1) indicates the key phases of the proposed 2-year study. We have created a timeline for key activities with a target timeline of beginning interview data collection this fall. The interviewing is expected to last from November 2021 until July 2022. Transcribing will begin in

January 2022 and is estimated to take until September 2022. While coding is anticipated to begin March 2022 and continue until November 2022. The final phase of the proposed study will involve further analysis and creation of our research outputs; conference manuscripts, journal manuscripts and a practitioner findings report (available online and disseminated through media outlets and the CBoC).

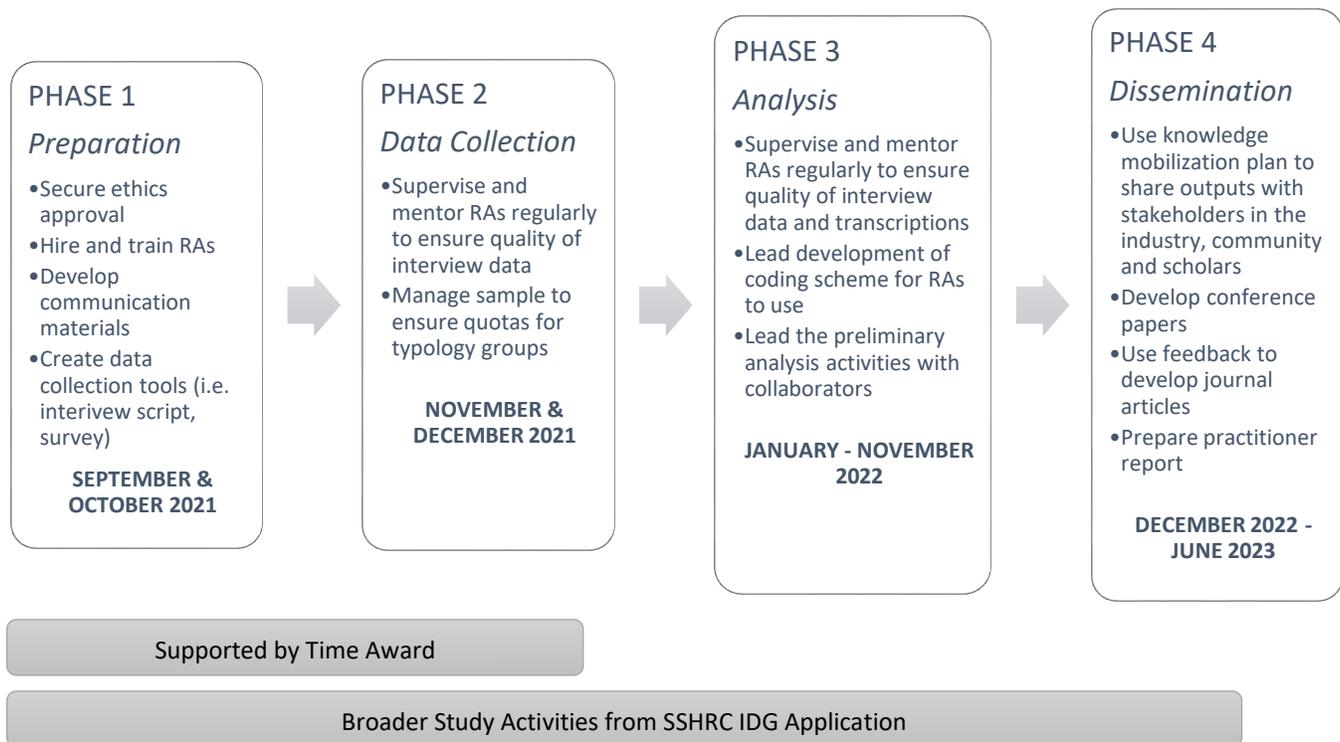


Figure 1. Timeline for proposed long-term study

### ANTICIPATED BENEFITS

The Time Award will provide *me* time needed to concentrate on the critical first parts of this study in Fall 2021 (e.g., ethics application, develop interview script, train RAs), which would positively impact the longer-term success of this research. The proposed study is a natural extension of my current research, which has examined how individuals cope with change in stable ‘normal’ contexts and how employees manage work and life demands. I have extensively studied how individuals make sense of and respond to change and how individuals perceive and cope with change over time (Gover & Duxbury, 2012; 2013; 2018a; 2018b; Gover et al., 2016). The proposed research will also allow me to extend my qualitative data analysis expertise into the work-life domain.

Findings from this study will have a number of anticipated benefits for different stakeholders. This research, which identifies the challenges employees may face when they are exposed to a variety of physical distancing measures, as well as the mechanisms that may buffer against negative outcomes associated with those challenges should benefit **governments, unions, and organizations** who seek to support **employees**. during these challenging times. Furthermore, **VIU students** will gain valuable experience, opportunities to develop research, analytic and communication skills as well as professional exposure through paid Research Assistant roles. The insights gained from this research will also inform **current offerings in the Faculty of Management**. More specifically, work-life issues and change management are key topics in ‘Workplace Safety & Wellness’ and ‘Strategic HR Planning’. This experience will also directly inform curriculum development in the MBA program, which includes a stream of research courses. Finally, during knowledge mobilization we will leverage well-known media outlets (i.e. Globe & Mail, CBC), which is likely to raise **VIU’s** profile regionally, nationally and internationally.

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