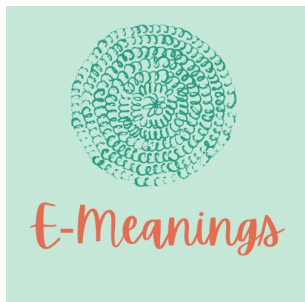




What happens when the family system encounters the work system and the school system during a pandemic?

Part 1

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Differences and opportunities

In the beginning of the first lockdown, we came together as professionals with overlapping interests in the new connected world, and networked society. Exploring the remote working experience we recognise how this massive organisational experiment was not just a typical shift to remote working. As Adam Gorlick, director of communication at Stamford, in an [article](#), pointed out - *what's happening today with the coronavirus crisis is completely different thanks to four factors: children, space, privacy and choice.*

We soon realised that all around the world, families were facing the unprecedented challenge of being confined to their homes. For instance, in the UK 13 million working parents had to re-adapt their life patterns in response to a new Covid-19 lockdown work-family-homeschooling reality.

We felt the opportunity had arisen to offer a space for study and thinking about those changes. Therefore, we designed an intervention directed at working parents in the UK, Ireland and Italy, aimed to support them in reflecting and learning about their new roles and unique experiences.

From 30th December 2020, the new restrictions in the UK have again forced parents and childrens to stay at home provoking a [sense of fear, uncertainty](#) in an already Covid-19 lockdown fatigued world.

We will share our findings from our early pandemic research in this three-part series, where we will unfold the experiences of parents, as they create and find their different new roles.

Our intention is to invite organisations, families, and individuals, to reflect together around what services and interventions can be designed to answer the needs of working parents, and to support them in adapting to the 'new normal', and to thrive.

Comparing and contrasting the differences between the various types of governmental lockdowns, our research intervention enabled us to take snapshots of the changing dynamics, concerns, and the interactions of parents and children, as they moved through different phases and stages of lockdown, to face this 'new normal' together.

The project

Our project started with the hypothesis that:

Working remotely during the coronavirus outbreak is characterised by a loss of separate identity between personal and professional lives.

To explore this hypothesis, we examined the intersection of three systems during this lockdown period: the family system, the organisational system, and the school/homeschooling system. The methodology used is based on a psychoanalytic and systemic model, which explores unconscious underlying motivations and dynamics whilst taking into account the social and contextual systemic realities (Armstrong, 2004, 2005; Czander, 1993; Hirschhorn, 1992; Hutton, Bazalgette & Armstrong, 1994; Jaques, 1971; Miller & Rice, 1967).

The diagram below (*Figure 1*) represents our idea of the Pre-Pandemic Society (*left*), with parents and children negotiating a system, which mostly keeps the school and work systems apart, with the home system intersecting each system. We were interested to discover if the boundaries of the home/school/work systems *really did merge* during the lockdown (*right*), and if this was connected to a sense of boundary and identity loss.

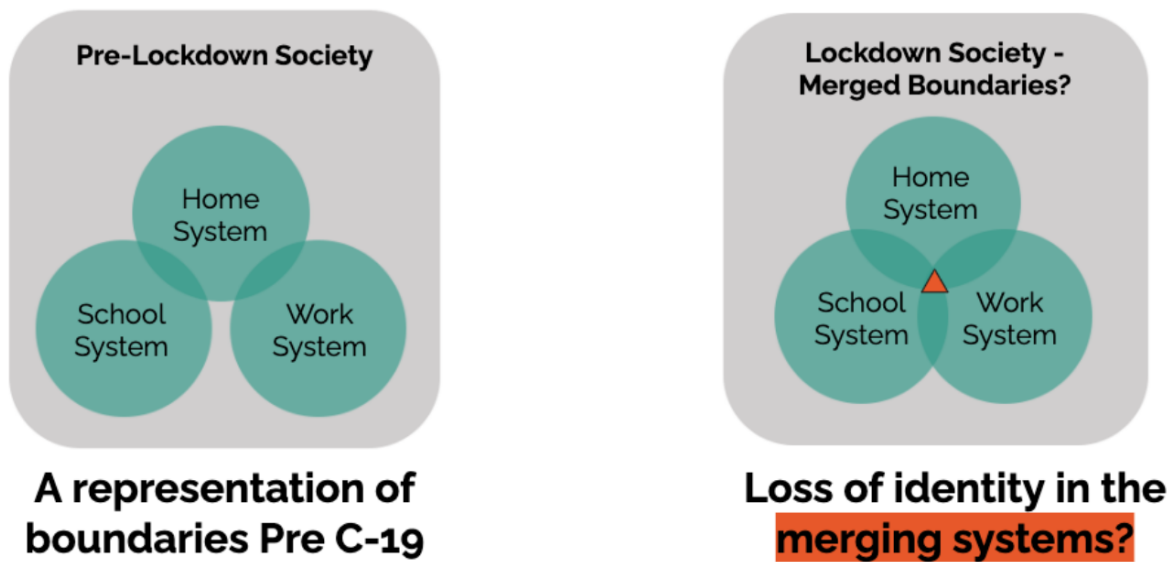


Figure 1: The boundaries being investigated in our project

Methodology

The participants - mostly unknown to one another - met on Zoom calls once a week for three weeks during May 2020. Participants were solicited by our invitation, or moved by their curiosity to explore and reflect upon their lockdown experiences. In total, six sessions were held - three in English, three in Italian. Sessions were run in parallel between the UK/Ireland and Italy groups, and we kept the same format for both territories.

Each of the three workshops had specific objectives, aiming to research the needs and questions proposed by the participants. To facilitate deep emotional thematics to emerge, we designed the sessions to include projective techniques such as drawings, object association, and semiotic analysis of the words used to describe the experience (the analysis of the meanings of words).

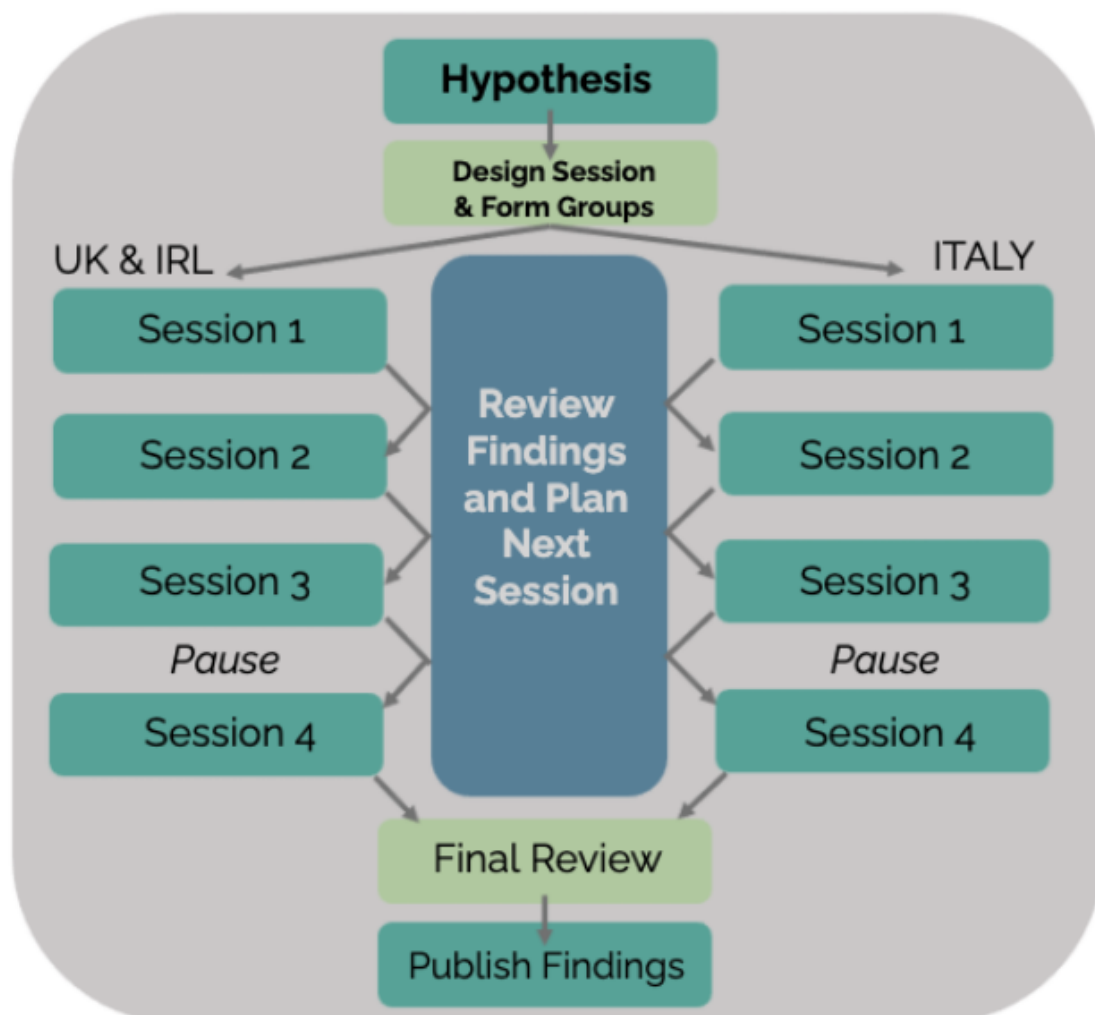


Figure 2: Our project design methodology

The differences between the Italian and UK/Irish territories were remarkable, as were the participant's journeys through Covid-19 first lockdown. Their fears, hopes - and all the emotional complexity that such a previously un navigated experience can solicit - emerged strongly through the participants' contributions. We co-created a reflective space, one which gave voice and meaning to their experience.

During the 3 weeks, we identified interesting differences and emerging themes involving the experiences of working whilst parenting, and the relationship with the school and home-schooling systems. Note: As we worked with a relatively small sample of participants, our research doesn't aim to explain all the phenomena we encountered.

What can we learn from differences?

Our analysis will start looking at differences and focus on the variables that emerged in our project.

1. The first relevant variable is the different group composition. In the UK & Ireland we had three men joining five women. In Italy the first meeting's quota of eight participants were all mothers. The parenting/working structure created its own field of study. In the UK, in households where both parents were working, a culture of 50/50 responsibility emerged, in contrast to the heavily mother-dependent Italian culture:

Our first experience of consulting with the Italian group reflected a strong sense of emerging female unity. A culture was expressed, in which women are charged with family responsibility at all levels; the functions of nurturing the family, the transition in and out of lockdown, generally managing all aspects of home life, and overseeing the difficult intersections of the various systems of belonging.

Also, households where just one parent was working created tensions and differences. In this scenario questions emerged surrounding presence/absence, activating feelings of guilt, and challenging the work identity. Single mothers in both countries represented a difference that was 'acted out'; participants took up group time/thinking space as an expression of their unique challenges encountered during the lockdown. In light of these powerful expressions, the rest of the group took the position of spectators - or of a condescending participant.

2. The second interesting variable is the age of the participants' children. Families with small children talked about the difficulties of dependency emerging.

Children mirrored their lost dependence relationship with teachers and their school/school friends, onto the parenting relationship.

Families with teenagers illustrated a contrasting dynamic: the teenager's independence was symbolised by participant's drawing a closed-door; evoking a painful relationship which was difficult to name, and acknowledge in the group.

3. Lastly, but crucially, the school system was a key differentiator between the different territories. Italy, the UK, and Ireland have adopted different strategies and offered differing levels of policing their unique rules. In doing so, the experience of confinement assumed quite different nuances. We found that the difference between the Irish and Italian (policed) versus the UK (largely unpoliced) types of lockdown impacted upon how parents 'found' an integrative space for the home, work, and school systems.

In the UK the frustration of the experience of home-schooling was expressed by a sense of rebellion, where the school was criticised and undermined in its importance as an educational institution. For the UK and Ireland, nature represented the idealised new classroom, where parents could regress, and retreat from their demands by playing with their children. In Italy (where people were restricted to a 200M radius from their homes), school was either idealised or lived as a persecutory and demanding system, in which the mothers struggled to find a position. In Italy, the home was felt as a constricted space.

The image brought by one of the participants - a *rainbow prison* - summarised the experience of being *locked* in the house; a painful yet hopeful space, characterised by the struggle to find a happy ending where parents and children face the unspoken challenge of finding a new space to construct together. The challenges of addressing the complex demands of lockdown, and to integrate the work, family, and home-schooling systems, resulted in many participants expressing feelings of inadequacy. These took the form of a swing between omnipotence and impotence. These feelings manifested in participants' idealisation or criticism of themselves; it also manifested in their sometimes being critical on the experience of reflecting together.

Conclusion

From the analysis above, a sense of the newly-introduced parents coming together to form groups, and pairings, emerged. Brought together by similar experiences, there remained some differences within the groups themselves; differences which are difficult for individuals to explore on their own without group thinking, and consultation to help examine the processes and dynamics at work in the group.

The process of strangers coming together to start to look at their experiences during lockdown, led to many similarities being discovered, and both groups began to form solutions and to explore their capacity to broaden their resilience.

We believe that if experiences remain unexplored, homeworking can come to represent a state of separation in which the work system may become fragmented. There is the possibility that tensions, anger and idealisation can permeate as unsupported parents struggle to come to terms with their journeys through/post lockdown. The emergence of a new work and societal 'normal' post Covid-19 may also be idealised, leaving parents potentially struggling to navigate the changes in society, the workplace, and within their families.

We will explain these enriching, often challenging, and sometimes overwhelming, processes further in the next articles and offer potential solutions for organisations to tackle these challenges.

About us:

E-meanings is a consulting group formed of three consultants from the UK, Ireland and Italy with skills and experiences in organisational change, social research and psychoanalysis. We share a systems-psychodynamic approach, and complement it with three perspectives: an affective neurosciences approach, a data and social psychological perspective, and a cognitive behavioural psychotherapeutic approach.

We offer consultation for individuals, groups, and organisations in transition and change, remote working, resilience, conflict resolution and more. If you or organisation are interested in discovering more about how we can help, please get in touch.

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