

Cornered by Corona while writing a master's thesis - Juggling multiple and opposing roles in a confined time and space

Helle Merete Nordentoft¹, Pia Seidler Cort¹ & Anne
Larson¹

¹*Aarhus University, Danish School of Education, Tuborgvej 164, 2400 Copenhagen NV,
Denmark*

Writing a master's thesis is often loaded with expectations and sometimes also a certain amount of anxiety. In this regard, previous research has mostly focused on the importance of the supervisor-supervisee relationship and not how students' everyday lives and working conditions affect their writing process. Based on a single case study, we reveal tacit understandings and typifications of how everyday life affects master's thesis writing. Looking at the pandemic as a breach, the analysis shows how COVID19 can function as a magnifying glass and expose how a female student managed to study when confined to home during lockdown. The analysis shows how she struggled to fulfil her ideals of being a good mother, a good student, and a good citizen and how the compression and collision of these typifications within limited time and space placed her in a double-bind situation, which led to emotional exhaustion and was counterproductive for her writing process. In conclusion, we argue that these findings call for a more holistic and ethical approach to master's thesis supervision taking into consideration the moral and emotional pressures that master's students encounter in their everyday lives.

Keywords: Master's thesis writing, COVID-19, female student, female student, phenomenological life-world approach, single case study

Introduction

The final assignment before graduating from university – the master's thesis – is often loaded with expectation, hope and a certain amount of anxiety for students: What is expected of me? Will I be able to fulfil my ambitions? (Ross & Sheail, 2017). In this regard, previous research has in particular emphasised the importance of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee for how students feel about and manage their writing process (Dupont, Galand, & Nils, 2015; Breunig & Penner, 2016; Nordentoft & Cort, 2020; Wagener, 2018). Meanwhile, this writing process is shaped and modified over time by the local context, by the individual characteristics of the student and the supervisor and by how their relationship develops. Pilcher goes so far as to refer to the thesis as “an elusive chameleon” (Pilcher, 2011). Still, until now how students' everyday lives affect their working conditions during the thesis-writing process has received less attention. To address this question, we look at what happens when the conditions for writing a master's thesis change drastically, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, where students had to study full time from their homes, magnifying the relationship between life as a thesis-writing student and other aspects of life. Some of these students lived alone while others live with flatmates, partners and/or children. Some had a home office space while others lived in cramped conditions. Some had to study on their own while others did so alongside home-schooled children and working partners. No matter what, the changed working conditions challenged the thesis-writing students and their ability to plan and shape their process as societal activities entered lockdown and left them isolated in their homes. In this article, we explore how a female master's student who is also a mother managed her thesis writing under these living conditions in light of her typifications of the ideal process were it not for the pandemic.

The article is based on a single case study that was part of a larger qualitative and longitudinal study on the process of writing a master's thesis, carried out at a Danish University over a period of one year at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic from November 2020 to October 2021. We have selected a specific narrative for analysis from December 2020, when Denmark was in the midst of a second period of lockdown. At this exact time, the student we call Lea, who was also the mother of a young child, was about to start working on her thesis. The lockdown meant that she was no longer able to meet

with her supervisor or fellow students in person, nor did she have physical access to the university campus, including the library. From one day to the next, she was sent home into isolation with her family.

Previous research on the effects of the COVID-19 lockdowns has indicated that it placed emotional stress on family life and challenged gender equality (França et al., 2023). In our analysis of Lea's narrative, we supplement previous findings (Franca et al., 2023; Jellen & Ohlbrecht, 2020) by using a phenomenological lifeworld approach (Schutz, 1964/1971; 1972) to show how the pandemic affected the everyday life of a female master's thesis student in a Scandinavian country and how she navigated between being a mother and being a student in a compressed time and space.

Inspired by Garfinkel's idea of "breaching experiments" that break unspoken rules or norms and reveal how people react to such violations (Garfinkel, 1967), we regard COVID-19 as a breach that can help us understand students' tacit expectations concerning how writing a master's thesis is linked to their everyday lives. As such, this article seeks to identify students' tacit, taken-for-granted understandings and expectations of what it implies to be a good master's thesis student, a good mother, a good wife and a good citizen. Furthermore, due to the COVID-19 breach, our study serves as a magnifying glass, revealing how students approach thesis writing during a crisis (such as the pandemic), as well as how they cope with the compression of tasks and roles in a domestic context – in this case, a female master's student with a child.

In the following sections, we firstly consult previous literature on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected students' everyday lives. Secondly, we introduce our methodological approach. After analysing Lea's narrative, we finally reflect on and discuss how our findings might inform approaches to the supervision of the thesis-writing process.

Gendered tensions in students' lives during COVID-19

The research literature on the impact of COVID-19 on students in higher education reports negative effects on students' lives. In many cases, students experienced difficulties in juggling learning from home with other obligations when family members were also working from home (Parker & Bernadowski, 2021). Evidently, the transition

to online education caused anxiety, frustration and a lack of engagement. In this regard, several studies have described how students' self-regulation processes, self-motivation and self-directed learning were a challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alsandor & Trout, 2020; Bolumole, 2020; Gillis & Krull, 2020; Gregersen et al., 2023; Parker & Bernadowski, 2021). As an example, in an essay, one student described how the pandemic stripped him of his will and opportunity to be productive and how he felt so overwhelmed by grief and loneliness that he found himself weeping one day (Bolumole, 2020). Meanwhile, a Danish study of university students at the beginning of the first COVID-19 lockdown showed how, despite a sense of online fatigue, the students were able to find new and creative ways of using online media for social purposes, although this did not fully compensate for the lack of in-person contact (Gregersen et al., 2023).

When examining broader studies of COVID-19 and the lockdowns, the effects on mothers with small children stand out. On the basis of a German online survey, Jellen & Ohlbrecht (2020) concluded that "there is evidence that parents and especially mothers have experienced emotional, performance and work-related disadvantages during the contact restrictions" (Jellen & Ohlbrecht, 2020, p. 50), while Allmendinger (2020) concluded that German mothers returned to traditional gender roles during the pandemic: "We are witnessing an appalling re-traditionalization. The distribution of tasks between men and women is like in the old days: rolled back" (Allmendinger, 2020, p. 45, our translation).

Women bore the burden of childcare (Möhring et al., 2021; Zoch et al., 2021) and adjusted their working hours accordingly (Bünning et al., 2020). COVID-19 not only brought to the fore but reinforced gender inequalities in family work (Zoch et al., 2021, p. 586). Research on women in academia has shown similar tendencies. CohenMiller & Izenkova (2022) explored the impact of COVID-19 on mothers in academia using a photovoice methodology. Their study included what they term 'scholarmothers' from around the world, although the majority were from either the US or Kazakhstan. They reported that "... balancing academic work, homeschooling and not being able to find time for themselves affected their health negatively" (CohenMiller & Izenkova, 2022, p. 822). In line with Allmendinger, they pointed to "ingrained gender roles", with participants explaining "the responsibilities they took on as women and mothers as aligned with expectations of these positions" (CohenMiller & Izenkova, 2022, p 825).

Lantsoght et al. (2021) likewise point to how particularly women with young children working in academia experienced stress and adverse productivity effects during the pandemic. As described by França et al. (2023) based on a study of parenthood in academia during the COVID-19 pandemic: when the workplace entered the home, family life and work life could no longer be separated – not only for the individual academic, but also for work relations. França et al.'s findings indicate that especially mothers in academia appeared to be caught in a double-bind situation due to a clash between the “intensive mothering ideology” – i.e., societal expectations that women be omnipresent for their children, meeting their demands without fail – and the academic culture of performativity, which also requires unfaltering engagement (França et al., 2023, p. 38). In this article, we will show how a Danish student writing her master's thesis experienced this double-bind situation.

Methodology

As mentioned above, the narrative on which we base our analysis in this article stems from a wider study of students who were writing their master's thesis at a Danish university during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were recruited for this wider study through self-selection via the university's online learning platform. All participants gave informed consent. In total, 14 students took part in the study, all of whom were women, despite gender not being a criterion for selection. Five of these women were also mothers. The fact that all the students were women means that we are not able to say whether our findings also apply to other students.

To capture these students' everyday experiences, we used ‘snaplogs’, a method combining a snapshot photo and a written or oral log in which informants describe what the photo depicts and why they took *that* particular picture (Bramming et al., 2012), as well as focus group interviews. The students were prompted four times over the course of the study to take photos and reflect on their writing process and everyday life in writing or in the form of an audiolog. The photos further acted as a jumping-off point for the subsequent interviews. The synergy between the visual and the spoken in this methodology taps into and has the potential to address situated emotional, bodily and

material reflections as they evolve during the study (Bramming et al., 2012; Harper, 2002; A2). At the same time, using snaplogs as a method has the potential to empower participants by giving them greater influence in determining the focus of the subsequent interview. The use of snaplogs furthermore provides the researcher with better access to tacit aspects of the participant's social worlds – aspects that might otherwise be ignored or taken for granted (Lorentz, 2011, Clark-Ibáñez, 2004).

Analytical approach

In the analysis of our empirical data, we were inspired by the idea of openness in a phenomenological sense (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merrill & West, 2009; Dahlberg et al., 2001): “openness in lifeworld research means entering the world of a person and leaving behind any structures that would shape one's expectations for what will be found” (Dahlberg et al., 2001, p. 111). In order to qualify the validity of the analytical process, we (the authors of the article) coded the data separately, before we meet and compared our notes. During the coding process, Lea's narrative particularly stood out. The complete narrative is attached as an appendix with factual information, including her name, altered to maintain anonymity.

The audio file is from December 2020 and nearly 11 minutes long. The narrative ‘shone’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 232) as a condensation of experiences and coping strategies among those of our female interviewees who were also mothers, as mentioned above. Thus, the choice of Lea's narrative from December 2020 as the unit of analysis was made because it captures much of the essence of the emotions and coping strategies found both in her other contributions to the study and in the contributions from the other participating master's thesis students with children (Larson, Cort & Nordentoft, 2023). We thus consider the narrative exemplary for the way the mothers in the study experienced and handled thesis writing during the pandemic.

We are aware that the narrative represents “a contingent, situated representation of reality offering partial truths” (Phillips, Olesen, Schefferman-Petersen & Nordentoft, 2018, p. 3). However, in line with Simons (2015), we argue that “seeing the universal in the particular is a powerful way of generalizing” (Simons, 2015, p. 181). Moreover, this approach is also aligned with the phenomenological ambition of capturing immediate detailed and everyday situated experiences. In other words, we do not see Lea's

experiences as a mother and a master's thesis student as unique. Other female master's students with similar life circumstances are likely to share similar experiences of writing a master's thesis and to have been similarly affected by the pandemic lockdowns. We therefore see her narrative as representing both a paradigmatic and a critical case as it condenses themes that we also found elsewhere in our data (Larson et al, 2023). Furthermore, this narrative highlights a number of general characteristics concerning how a particular group of young women and mothers experienced the pandemic (CohenMiller & Izenkova, 2022; Jellen & Ohlbrecht, 2020; Möhring et al., 2021).

We approach Lea's narrative as a 'telling tale' (Reid & West, 2011), shedding light on how a student with a young family experienced the process of writing a master's thesis during the COVID-19 lockdowns. According to Polkinghorne (1996), people construct their identities and use narrative operations to produce stories about who they are (Polkinghorne, 1996, p. 300). The narrative is 'telling' in the sense that it provides an insight into a student's everyday experiences during the lockdown. Lea's narrative helps us understand not only how the pandemic influenced her life, her work and her sense of agency and identity, but also how extraordinary circumstances can reveal taken-for-granted normative structures and tacit ideals within everyday life. Expectations can, therefore, create double-bind situations, with the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic magnifying how many young women like Lea are required to juggle multiple and opposing roles in their everyday lives.

Setting the scene for Lea's narrative

At the time of Lea's narrative (December 2020), Lea was in her early thirties and living with her husband and baby son in a small apartment. Before studying for her master's degree, she had worked in a welfare profession, and she had always taken a keen interest in politics and gender issues – perspectives that she wanted to incorporate in her thesis. Lea's natural attitude and stock of knowledge in her daily life and academia were formed by common-sense constructs shaped by her living conditions pre-COVID-19 (Vargas, 2020; Schutz, 1972). Her attitude therefore affected how to navigate, find her bearings "and come to terms with one's [her] environment" (Kim & Berard, 2009, p. 268) in an extraordinary situation. In her narrative, Lea describes her experiences in December 2020

when Denmark – like many other parts of the world – was in complete lockdown for the second time. It was a critical point in the pandemic with new lockdowns and other measures seeking to curb an increase in infections (Petersen & Roepstorff, 2020). Physical attendance at the university was suspended from the beginning of the autumn semester, which meant that all contact was online. Nobody knew when the lockdown would end, but everyone hoped that it would soon be possible to return to a normal way of life. At the beginning of the second lockdown, the health authorities recommended that people spent Christmas and New Year with only close relatives and friends and did not travel to other parts of the country. At the same time, a report from December 2020 showed a pronounced increase in the number of young people feeling lonely and in stress levels among the general population (Petersen & Roepstorff, 2020).

In this situation, the Danish Prime Minister made two appeals to Danish citizens: Firstly, she expressed from the very beginning that every death due to COVID-19 was a tragedy and asserted that all Danes could save lives by following the COVID-19 guidelines and recommendations issued by the Danish authorities. Secondly, she appealed to all Danish citizens to show ‘public spirit’, hereby indicating that those who did *not* comply with the rules and regulations and thus did *not* show ‘public spirit’ could cause the deaths of fellow citizens. Furthermore, when the lockdown was extended in December, all parents were asked to keep their children at home. Emergency day-care units were established, but mainly for the children of citizens in critical functions or for children with special needs. At the same time, the day-care and school staff who had not been sent home felt unsafe and vulnerable, complaining in the media of a lack of testing capacity and facilities in kindergartens and schools.

Thus, while all students were sent home, being the mother of a small child and with a husband who was not sent home, Lea had to decide whether to show ‘public spirit’ and keep her child at home or use the emergency day-care units. In her narrative, the typifications (Nathanson, 1962; 1970) of home and study become intertwined, overlap and collide, with examples of how Lea’s normal way of life had been breached. It is also apparent that the political rhetoric and moral appeal by the Prime Minister infiltrated the choices Lea had to make in managing her everyday life.

After this introductory note, we will now present our analysis of Lea's narrative, exploring how she coped with the lockdown in her everyday life. The analysis is divided into seven themes that emerged through this analysis.

Analysis

Between study, mothering and housekeeping

Lea begins the narrative with some contextual information regarding her family status and living conditions:

I live in a small apartment with my child and my husband who works in the building industry and does not get sent home because of corona. Construction work just keeps going. So I am just a full-time mother at home alone in a small apartment. I cannot study there (Lea's narrative)

Two negations stand out in this description: Her husband not being sent home and her not being able to work at home. This framing indicates 1) that being sent home was the 'new normal' and 2) that she knew that she was expected to work from home. It also indicates a double breach that Lea had to deal with. Firstly, under normal circumstances, she would have studied at the university campus, but now she could not; and secondly, she was expected to study at home, but could not do that either. Later in the narrative, she returns to this double-bind situation.

This situation appeared to challenge Lea's taken-for-granted understandings of what it means to study and to be a mother. With the lockdown, Lea was forced to juggle the roles as a student and as a mother to a little boy in another way than if she had been able to drop off her son at the kindergarten and work at the university campus. Her workload increased since her husband was not at home during the day and she had to take full responsibility for daytime childcare while at the same time pursuing full-time studies. This finding is in line with other studies pointing out how mothers assumed caring responsibilities during the pandemic (e.g. Jellen & Ohlbrecht, 2020; Möhring et al., 2021; Zoch et al., 2021). Also many of the other female interviewees in our study with small children faced a similar and stressful workload (Larson et al, 2023).

Reflecting on her conditions, Lea concluded that she could not study in her small apartment while also taking care of her child. The spatial overlap between family and work seemed to disturb certain taken-for-granted conceptions of what constitutes a proper working space – i.e., not a small apartment in which she also had to mother her child. In addition, as a student, she felt that she should not ‘just’ be a mother stuck at home with her baby boy. In other words, the consequences of the lockdown prevented her from working on her thesis in the way she believed she should.

In other logs and interviews with Lea during the period studied, it became even clearer how her typifications of what it means to be a good student were disrupted. Unable to visit the library, borrow books or meet with her supervisor or fellow students in person, she seemed to lose her orientation and began to question how she might perform as ‘a good student’ under the conditions caused by the pandemic. These circumstances clearly affected her motivation and self-regulation process, as also described in previous studies (Alsandor & Yilmazli Trout, 2020; Bolumole, 2020).

Between ‘public spirit’, a guilty conscience and childcare

After reflecting on the difficulties of combining the roles of master’s thesis student and mother, Lea goes on to describe her struggles in meeting her own expectations of being a good student, a good mother and a good citizen all at the same time. Lea’s narrative reflects how, as a student and mother of a young child, she seemed to be caught between opposing typifications of what is considered ‘the right thing to do’. The two pauses in the first line in the following quote seems to emphasise this struggle as she searches to find the right words:

... so I am just battling with like [pause] a [pause] feeling that I actually want to keep him at home during corona and want to show public spirit and support the day-care centre and not put pressure on anyone, and take him home. And at the same time I just feel that if I don’t work all the time while he can be sent off to day-care, then I will be caught between a rock and a hard place any moment now when everyone is sent home again because of some sort of mutation, and then I simply cannot imagine how this thesis-writing process will go (Lea’s narrative).

The political rhetoric about what it means to be a good citizen and showing ‘public spirit’ by *not* handing over responsibility for her child to the childcare centre during a pandemic clearly affected Lea. At the same time, she felt that being a responsible citizen left her “between a rock and a hard place”, as she puts it. Lea’s considerations appear to be shaped by a typification of good motherhood implying that a good mother should prioritise her child’s needs ahead of her own ambitions and needs – cf. ‘intensive mothering’ (França et al., 2023). This seemed to clash with her internalisation of another political expectation concerning her performance as a student – handing in her thesis ‘on time’. As such, Lea faced a double bind in terms of fulfilling different and clashing typifications and political expectations.

She seemed at a loss and to be showing signs of stress when describing how she felt caught between the contradictory demands connected to the various roles she was simultaneously expected to perform, placing her in a moral quandary: how could she finish her thesis without neglecting her responsibilities as a mother and a citizen? This seemed like an impossible task given the pandemic-related typifications of how to show ‘public spirit’ by keeping your child at home unless your job was critical to the functioning of society – after all, can writing a thesis be considered a ‘critical function’? Similar feelings of being caught between irreconcilable expectations – and their adverse effects on motivation and self-directed learning – can be identified in the snaplogs and interviews with the other mothers in the study (Larson et al, 2023).

Even if Lea chose to send her son to day-care, it was unlikely to give her the necessary peace of mind to work effectively on her thesis, never knowing when her son might be sent home due to the outbreak of a new mutation among staff or children at the day-care centre.

In summary, Lea found herself in a catch-22 situation where the decision as to whether to send her son to day-care or keep him at home was a source of considerable stress.

Between current pressures and dreams (or nightmares) about future scenarios

When Lea begins to reflect on her prospects of completing her master’s thesis, her intonation increases, and she appears to be emotionally agitated as she outline several nightmare scenarios:

I already have these scenarios where I have to postpone it, that I won't be able to hand it in on time, and that is just my nightmare scenario – not because it would be a personal failure, but more because, the whole time, I have tried to visualise what my life would look like, without being too rigid, and I picture myself as being done with studying this summer, and imagining that this will continue all summer and into the autumn, this unpredictability and being sent home and working from home, it is [pause] it's such a downer and irritating and it sucks all the joy out of the project (Lea's narrative)

Lea's nightmare future scenarios seem to contain mixed typifications of her thesis writing. Her "nightmare scenario" of not being able to complete on time appear to indicate a typification of a good student who will do so – a typification which is also present in pre-pandemic studies of Danish students (e.g. Sarauw & Madsen, 2016). At the same time, during the interviews with Lea, she made several references to an ideal of thesis writing as a creative process, bursting with energy and dreams for the future – writing a master's thesis constituting a specific period in her life leading to whatever comes after. However, COVID-19 seemed to have punctured these dreams. The frustration that she expressed concerned the unpredictable nature of the writing process and how COVID-19 affected and obstructed the flow of her entire life and all its constituent parts – including the master's thesis. In this regard, Lea's frustrations shed light on a typification in which life was more predictable before the pandemic, when there was a certain regularity and rhythm to everyday life: You went to work and came home again – more importantly, you did not risk being sent home at any given moment. Without being "too rigid", as Lea puts it, she seem to feel that she was able to have dreams and make plans for her future before the pandemic, but that this was no longer possible due to the unpredictability it had caused.

Thus, COVID-19 appeared to have disrupted students' daily lives and created a situation in which they were unable to perform everyday tasks like normal. COVID-19 seemed to have introduced an unpredictability to everyday life, while at the same time compressing routines and everyday activities into a single time-space unit: the home. The unpredictability became a straitjacket – Lea's everyday life slowed down, almost brought to a standstill, sucking all the joy out of writing her thesis. In summary, there appeared to be a gap between, on the one hand, Lea's ambitions and dreams for the future and, on

the other hand, what she felt was reasonable and realistic in the context of the pandemic. With reference to Jellen and Ohlbrecht (2020), this may indicate a degree of existential anxiety and fear for the future. Lea's emotional state was thus linked to the collision between her typifications of her different roles – typifications that were embedded in societal norms and ideals that she was trying to live up to.

A longing for more control

The pandemic, the unpredictability of the situation and the lockdowns and restrictions seemed to have dampened Lea's sense of freedom and of being in control of her life. Talking about her prospects for the immediate future, Lea sum up her current situation and what she see as possible future scenarios:

... I am not at all looking forward to immersing myself for half a year in this project because I feel that I have absolutely no control over how it is going to play out. Um, all the things I had planned that I would like to do for myself in order to make it a positive process... (Lea's narrative)

From making plans to ensure that writing the thesis would be a positive process, she appear to have become more defeatist, feeling that things were beyond her control. As such, Lea's reflection seems to contain an underlying typification that writing a thesis normally involves greater freedom and more control over the process. She thus had to navigate a situation in which she felt drained – the joy that she felt she should have felt was absent, leaving her with a feeling of frustration that disrupted and disturbed her writing process.

The search for peace and quiet and a 'suitable working environment'

Lea redirect her stream of consciousness to focus on her physical working environment, which she considered unsatisfactory:

... because now I have realised, having worked at home many times, that I *haven't* got a proper chair to sit in, I *have not* got a proper table to sit at – my back hurts, my neck hurts. It is a real pain in the arse. I *do not* have proper lighting, I *cannot* have a

workstation at home where all my shit can lie around; I carry books around, sit in my friend's flat while she is at her boyfriend's place (Lea's narrative, our emphasis)

Lea did not consider her home well suited for working on the thesis. In the passage quoted above, she mentions a number of things that she felt constitute a good working environment to which she did not have access at home. The furniture, the lighting and the space itself did not match her expectations of how things should be – and how she thought things could have been if she had access to the facilities at the university campus. Lea's frustrations are evident in all the negations she uses (underlined in the excerpt above) and typify a normal university as a place that offers what she considers more suitable working conditions where she would not have to move her stuff around each day.

Earlier in the narrative, Lea mentioned how her role as a mother encroached upon her work on the master's thesis as her husband had not been sent home from work. However, it would seem that he was sometimes able to look after their child as she mentions going to a friend's place to work in peace and quiet. Like a nomad, she carries her books to and from this friend's flat. In a later log, Lea also mentioned that her husband had given her a pair of AirPods for Christmas, which helped her shut out her surroundings when working on the thesis, seeking refuge in the isolation that modern technology can provide.

Not only her mind but also her body was affected by the lockdown situation; COVID-19 changed her life as a student. From having access to a workstation with good lighting, a good table and a proper chair in a peaceful environment at the university campus, Lea became an academic nomad looking for any chance of some peace and quiet to work on her thesis. Such challenges were also apparent in the logs and interviews with the other students with children in our study (Larson et al, 2023).

Physical deterioration, social isolation and racing thoughts

Lea continues to reflect on her situation at the time of the narrative. By using anaphors and listing all the things that she *cannot not* do she enforces how these obstructions in her daily life impacts her wellbeing:

...and then I think: okay this is how things are right now, what can I do to make the thesis process different? But I *cannot* do my yoga, strengthen my back, and sit on a ball

because... *I cannot* go shopping, the yoga centres are closed, *I cannot* work out, *I am not* allowed [pause] sigh... to take my mind off all of these thoughts racing around my head by meeting with friends, other than taking a socially distanced evening stroll when I have put my child to bed (Lea's narrative, our emphasis)

In talking about all the activities she could not perform, she implied what normal, everyday life used to be like before the pandemic – including her notions of the good life. The disrupted link between her physical and psychological wellbeing initiated a chain reaction, setting her thoughts racing, which, in turn, affected her work on the thesis – most likely having a detrimental effect judging from her increasingly agitated tone of voice when she talked about not being able to go shopping or to the yoga centres because they are closed. Her train of thought reveals a number of breached typifications such as: a well-balanced everyday life involves keeping fit, taking care of your physical condition, and clearing your mind when necessary by sharing thoughts and ideas with close friends – and not just in the evening, outdoors and socially distanced. Her common-sense constructs based on her experiences and everyday practices pre-COVID-19 reflect a taken-for-granted reality (cf. Natanson, 1970) that fell apart in the pandemic context. As such, when Lea felt extremely lonely and isolated, she experienced these feelings against the backdrop of her longing for a normal and sociable life.

Between COVID-19, mental exhaustion and a fear of the future

When describing her concerns about how the social and physical restrictions might affect not only her but also the rest of her little family, Lea use adverbs like 'really' and adjectives like 'scared' to accentuate her distress:

I just feel like I'm in a *really tight* spot, despite having an *incredibly* supportive husband and a *bloody* great kid who *luckily* are not ill, and I am *struck* by this kind of first-world frame of mind, like, *luckily* I am not afraid of any of us getting corona; *luckily* we are all fit and healthy ...I am just afraid how this is going to affect us all, like...I am not afraid of the disease...I am *scared* what it can do to us, being put in a situation of total isolation where it *really, really* puts a strain on us (Lea's narrative, our emphasis).

Her flat is not just small but *really tight*, and she is not just nervous but *scared* etc. The way in which she loaded her speech with words like this illustrates how she felt cornered by the pandemic. Paradoxically, at the same time, she indicated that she did not feel she had a right to such feelings, referring to a “first-world frame of mind”. As well as accentuating her distress, she thus belittled her frustrations as being ‘privileged’. She seemed to feel guilty in complaining about her situation. Her final reflection hereby adds another dimension to the guilty conscience that Lea had previously described when talking about her conflicting and overlapping roles as a student, citizen and mother – she felt guilty in complaining about her situation.

Concluding discussion

Phenomenological lifeworld research has shown how we collaboratively construct the world as a meaningful and orderly place. In this regard, common-sense understandings serve as tools that structure people’s social lives against a backdrop of the social order within a particular socio-political conjuncture. This article has sought to shed light on tacit understandings and typifications of what it means to write a master’s thesis, both within and beyond the context of a pandemic, from the perspective of a mother with a young family. To this end, we have explored Lea’s typifications of the ideal thesis-writing process and how she has responded to them.

In the analysis, we approached the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns as a breach of tacit norms and a magnifying glass that reveals expectations and typifications of what writing a master’s thesis normally entails. In our analysis of Lea’s narrative, three themes particularly stand out:

1. An experience of double bind and unfulfilled expectations. The narrative indicates that the pandemic disturbed Lea’s typifications of how to fulfil her roles as, for instance, a mother, a student and a citizen. The new situation disrupted, even erased, the boundaries between these roles through a compression of time and space, forcing Lea to find new ways of navigating between these sometimes conflicting roles in everyday life and temper her expectations

2. Societal expectations regarding what constitutes a good student. These expectations, such as handing in one's thesis 'on time', are magnified by the pandemic, further accentuating the aforementioned double bind.
3. COVID-19 as an exceptional set of circumstances that pose additional challenges. The lack of physical boundaries between work and home spaces confused and questioned Lea's taken for granted about the 'normal' character and nature about what constitutes 'normal' family and student life. The unusual isolation and lack of human contact led to uncertainty, with Lea unsure how she and her family would be able to tackle the immediate future.

In line with other studies (e.g. Allmendinger, 2020; CohenMiller & Izenkova, 2022; França et al., 2023; Jellen & Ohlbrecht, 2022; Romani et al., 2021), our study shows how Lea adheres to traditional gender roles and divisions in her family life during the pandemic. As such, COVID-19 seemed to bring back – or highlight – traditional gender roles, with Lea struggling to live up to her own expectations of what it means to be a good mother while at the same time trying to work on her thesis.

In Lea's narrative, an important aspect of being a 'good student' involves completing her studies 'on time'. Danish higher education policy and higher education reforms over the past ten years have nudged students to complete their studies 'on time' and enter the labour market as quickly as possible (Degn & Sørensen, 2015; Ginn, 2014; Sarauw & Madsen, 2016). Although the pandemic made it difficult to meet this norm of completing her thesis 'on time', Lea seemed to have internalised this political rhetoric. She immersed herself in her thesis and still expected to enjoy the writing process but found herself caught in a double-bind situation between competing role expectations – i.e. the roles as mother and as student – that was reinforced by the pressure resulting from the political rhetoric and reforms. In addition, the lockdown made it impossible to maintain a clear demarcation between different spheres such as work, study, home and leisure in her everyday life. Both physical and mental transitions became muddled and blurred. This chaos brought an overwhelming and paradoxical complexity into Lea's life.

The analysis also exposes how the pandemic introduced a new political typification of the 'good citizen' that clashed with existing typifications of the 'good student' and the

‘good mother’. Moreover, the political rhetoric and typification of the ‘good citizen’ had the potential to ignite feelings of public ‘shame’ when failing to show ‘public spirit’ and follow the public guidelines. Our analysis demonstrates how COVID-19 and the associated political rhetoric was a breach of everyday life, of tacit norms and assumptions, that affected Lea and students in similar situations on both a professional and a personal level. We have unpacked how Lea’s frustrations were manifested in her everyday life and intersected with these breached typifications. The disruption of Lea’s expectations and typifications seems to push her to a point of mental exhaustion and feeling that she had no control over her life, making her wonder: Will I be able to finish my thesis?

Since typifications function “both as a scheme of interpretation and a scheme of orientation” (Schutz, 1964/1971, p. 237), the breach seemingly meant that Lea lost her bearings (Kim & Berard, 2009): the social isolation and other restrictions resulting from the pandemic made it increasingly difficult for her to navigate between and reconcile the contradictory and incompatible roles. The growing pressure experienced by Lea also seemed to lead her to idealise how things were pre-COVID-19. Lea was aware that, in a global context, she was privileged. However, she still produced what Polkinghorne (1996) termed a victimic narrative, in which protagonists “depict [their] lives as out of their control” (Polkinghorne, 1996, p. 302). This finding is largely in line with the findings of Jellen and Ohlbrecht (2020), who pointed to an increase in existential anxiety among mothers in particular as a result of the pandemic (Jellen & Ohlbrecht, 2020, p. 48).

In summary, our study shows how the complexity of the working conditions for master’s thesis students during COVID-19 affected the writing process. Our findings hereby deviate from and supplement previous research that has primarily focused on the supervisor-supervisee relationship. They reveal how tiring it can be for students to juggle multiple and sometimes contradictory roles during their thesis-writing process – which we assert is not only the case under pandemic conditions but also a challenge that many students also face outside the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic. We therefore argue that this is an example of what Simons has called “seeing the universal in the particular”, with COVID-19 acting as a magnifying glass to highlight previously tacit assumptions, norms and expectations. In conclusion, we advocate that perhaps it is time to puncture normative expectations of what writing a master’s thesis “should be” and encourage a more holistic and sustainable approach to master’s thesis supervision by

acknowledging and discussing the complexity of the writing process. Hopefully, such a step can alleviate the academic pressure of writing a master's thesis and reduce the moral and emotional pressure that master's students encounter in their everyday lives.

References

- Allmendinger, J. (2020). *Zurück in alte Rollen. Corona bedroht die Geschlechtergerechtigkeit* [Back to old roles. Corona threatens gender equality]. WZB Mitteilungen, Heft 168. Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung.
- Alsandor, D. J., & Trout, I. Y. (2020). Graduate Student Well-Being: Learning and Living during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Higher Education*, 5(1), 150. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jimphe.v5i1.2576>
- Bolumole, M. (2020). Student life in the age of COVID-19. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(7), 1357-1361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1825345>
- Bramming, P., Hansen, B.G., Bojesen, A., & Olesen, K.G. (2012). (Im)perfect pictures: snaplogs in performativity research. *Qualitative research in organizations and management*, 7(1), 54-71. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17465641211223465>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Breunig, M., & Penner, J. (2016). Relationship Matters: Duo-Narrating a Graduate Student/Supervisor Journey. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 4(6), 18-27. <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v4i6.1330>
- Bünning, M., Hipp, L., & Munnes, S. (2020). *Erwerbsarbeit in Zeiten von Corona* [Work in times of Corona]. WZB Ergebnisbericht. Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung
- Clark-Ibáñez, M. (2004). Framing the social world with photo-elicitation interviews. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47(12), 1507-1527. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764204266236>
- CohenMiller, A., & Izenkova, Z. (2022). Motherhood in Academia during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An International Online Photovoice Study Addressing Issues of Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education. *Innovative higher education*, 47(5), 813-835. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-022-09605-w>
- Corbera, E., Anguelovski, I., Honey-Rosés, J., & Ruiz-Mallén, I. (2020). Academia in the Time of COVID-19: Towards an Ethics of Care. *Planning Theory & Practice*,

21(2), 191-199. doi:10.1080/14649357.2020.1757891.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2020.1757891>

Dupont, S., Galand, B., & Nils, F. (2015). The impact of different sources of social support on academic performance: Intervening factors and mediated pathways in the case of master's thesis. *European Review of Applied Psychology / Revue Européenne de Psychologie Appliquée*, 65(5), 227-237.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erap.2015.08.003>

Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Degn, L., & Sørensen, M. (2015). From collegial governance to conduct of conduct: Danish universities set free in the service of the state. *Higher Education*, 69, 931-946. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9814-1>

Dysthe, O., Samara, A., & Westrheim, K. (2006). Multivoiced supervision of Master's students: a case study of alternative supervision practices in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(3), 299-318.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070600680562>

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219-245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>

Fossøy, I., & Haara, F. O. (2016). Training Master's Thesis Supervisors within a Professional Learning Community. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 5(4), 184-193. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v5n4p184>

França, T., Godinho, F., Padilla, B., Vicente, M., Amâncio, L., & Fernandes, A. (2023). "Having a family is the new normal": Parenting in neoliberal academia during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Gender, work, and organization*, 30(1), 35-51.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12895>

Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Gillis, A., & Krull, L. M. (2020). COVID-19 Remote Learning Transition in Spring 2020: Class Structures, Student Perceptions, and Inequality in College Courses. *Teaching sociology*, 48(4), 283-299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X20954263>

- Ginn, F. (2014). "Being Like a Researcher": Supervising Masters Dissertations in a Neoliberalizing University. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 38(1), 106-118 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2013.836746>
- Gregersen, E. M., Astrupgaard, S. L., Jespersen, M. H., Gårdhus, T. P. & Albris, K. (2023). Digital dependence: Online fatigue and coping strategies during the COVID-19 lockdown. *Media, Culture & Society*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437231154781>
- Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: a case for photo-elicitation. *Visual Studies*, 17(1), 13-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725860220137345>
- Jellen, J., & Ohlbrecht, H. (2020). Parenthood in a Crisis: Stress Potentials and Gender Differences of Parents During the Corona Pandemic. *International dialogues on education*, 7(1/2), 44. <https://doi.org/10.53308/ide.v7i1/2.24>
- Kim, K.-k., & Berard, T. (2009). Typification in Society and Social Science: The Continuing Relevance of Schutz's Social Phenomenology. *Human Studies*, 32(3), 263-289. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-009-9120-6>
- Lantsoght, E. O. L., Crepaldi, Y.T., Tavares, S. G., Leemans, K., & Paig-Tran, E. W. M. (2021). Challenges and Opportunities for Academic Parents During COVID-19. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.645734>
- Larson, A., Cort, P. S., & Nordentoft, H. M. (2023). Caught between study and family: Mature female students' thesis writing during Covid. In J. Lövgren, L. Sonne & N.M.Weiss, *New Challenges - New Learning - New Possibilities: Proceeding from the 9th Nordic Conference on Adult Education and Learning*. LIT Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.52038/9783643916587>
- Lorenz, L. S. (2011). A way into empathy: A 'case' of photo-elicitation in illness research. *Health*, 15(3), 259-275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459310397976>
- Merrill, B., & West, L. (2009). *Using biographical methods in social research*. Sage.
- Möhring, K., Naumann, E., Reifenscheid, M., Wenz, A., Rettig, T., Krieger, U., Friedel, S., Finkel, M., Corness, C. & Blom, A. G. (2021). The COVID-19 pandemic and subjective well-being: longitudinal evidence on satisfaction with work and family. *European societies*, 23(S1), S601-S617. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1833066>

- Natanson, M. (1970). Phenomenology and typification: a study in the philosophy of Alfred Schutz. *Social research*, 37(1), 1-22.
- Nordentoft, H. M., & Cort, P. S. (2020). Specialevejledning på videregående uddannelser [Masters thesis supervision in higher education]. *Pædagogisk indblik* 7. NCS and Aarhus University Press. Retrieved from: https://dpu.au.dk/fileadmin/edu/Paedagogisk_Indblik/Specialevejledning/07_Specialevejledning_paa_de_videregaaende_uddannelser_final.pdf
- Parker, S. W., Hansen, M.A., & Bernadowski, C. (2021). COVID-19 Campus Closures in the United States: American Student Perceptions of Forced Transition to Remote Learning. *Social Sciences*, 10(62). <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10020062>
- Petersen, M. B. & Roepstorff, A. (2020). *Danskernes adfærd og holdninger til corona-epidemien. Resultater fra HOPE-projektet* [The Danes' behavior and opinions to the Corona-pandemic. Results from the HOPE-project]. Released 16/12/2020. Aarhus University Retrieved from: https://hope-project.au.dk/#/reports/danskernes_adfaerd_og_holdninger/versions/16-12-2020 .
- Phillips, L. J., Christensen-Strynø, M. B., & Frølund, L. (2021). Thinking with autoethnography in collaborative research: A critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics. *Qualitative Research*, 22(5), 761-776. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211033446>
- Phillips, L., Olesen, B. R., Scheffmann-Petersen, M. & Nordentoft, H. M. (2018). De-romanticising dialogue in collaborative health care research - A critical, reflexive approach to tensions in an action research project's initial phase. *Qualitative Research in Medicine and Health*, 2(1), <https://doi.org/10.4081/qrmh.2018.7178>
- Pilcher, N. (2011). The UK postgraduate Masters dissertation: An 'elusive chameleon'? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(1), 29-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.530752>
- Reid, H., & West, L. (2011). "Telling tales": Using narrative in career guidance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 78(2), 174-183. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2010.10.001>
- Romani, L., Zanoni, P., Holck, L., Hjalmsdottir, A., & Bjarnadottir, V. e. u. S. (2021). "I Have Turned into a Foreman Here at Home": Families and Work-life Balance in Times of COVID-19 in a Gender Equality Paradise. *Gender, work, and organization*, 28(1), 268-283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12552>

- Ross, J., & Sheail, P. (2017). The 'campus imaginary': Online students' experience of the masters dissertation at a distance. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22(7), 839-854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2017.1319809>
- Sarauw, L. L. & Madsen, S. R. (2016). *Studerende i en fremdriftstid. Prioriteter, valg, og dilemmaer set i lyset af fremdriftsreformen* [Student in a reform time. Priorities, choices and dilemmas in the aftermath of the study progress reform]. DPU, Aarhus University. Retrieved from: [https://edu.au.dk/fileadmin/edu/Forskning/EPOKE/Ebog - Fremdriftsreform - MARTS 2015.pdf](https://edu.au.dk/fileadmin/edu/Forskning/EPOKE/Ebog_-_Fremdriftsreform_-_MARTS_2015.pdf)
- Schutz, A. (1964/1971). *Collected Papers II, Studies in Social Theory*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Schutz, A. (1972). *Collected Papers I: The Problem of Social Reality*. Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Simons, H. (2015). Interpret in context: Generalizing from the single case in evaluation. *Evaluation*, 21(2), 173-188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356389015577512>
- Vargas, G. (2020). Alfred Schutz's Life-World and Intersubjectivity. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(12), 417-425. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2020.812033> .
- Wagener, B. (2018). The Importance of Affects, Self-Regulation and Relationships in the Writing of a Master's Thesis. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23(2), 227-242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2017.1379480>
- Xu, L. & Grant, B. (2017). International doctoral students' becoming: A dialogic perspective. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 54(6), 570-579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2017.1318711>
- Zahavi, D., & Overgaard, S. (2014). Fæmenologisk sociologi - hverdagslivets subjekt. [Phenomenological Sociology - the Subject of Every Day life.]. In M. H. Jacobsen & S. Kristiansen (Eds.), *Hverdagslivet - sociologier om det upåagtede* [Every Day Life - Sociology of the Unnoticed], (pp. 169-199). Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Zoch, G., Bächmann, A.-C., & Vicari, B. (2021). Who cares when care closes? Care-arrangements and parental working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. *European societies*, 23(sup 1), S576-S588. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1832700>

Appendix: Lea's narrative

I live in a small apartment with my child and my husband, who works in the building industry and does not get sent home because of corona. Construction work just keeps going. So I am just a full-time mother at home alone in a small apartment; I cannot study there, so I am just battling with like [pause] a [pause] feeling that I actually want to keep him [her son] at home during corona and want to show public spirit and support the day-care centre and not put pressure on anyone and take him home, and at the same time I just feel that if I don't work all the time while he can be sent off to day-care, then I will be caught between a rock and a hard place any moment now when everyone is sent home again because of some sort of mutation, and then I simply cannot imagine how this thesis-writing process will go and, um, I'm starting... I already have these scenarios where I have to postpone it, that I won't be able to hand it in on time, and that is just my nightmare scenario - not because it would be a personal failure, but more because, the whole time, I have tried to visualise what my life would look like, without being too rigid, and I picture myself as being done with studying this summer, and imagining that this will continue all summer and into the autumn, this unpredictability and being sent home and working from home, it is [pause] it's such a downer and irritating and it sucks all the joy out of the project and I am not at all looking forward to immersing myself for half a year in this project because I feel that I have absolutely no control over how it is going to play out. Um, all the things I had planned that I would like to do for myself in order to make it a positive process, because now I have realised, having worked at home many times, that I haven't got a proper chair to sit in, I haven't got a proper table to sit at - my back hurts, my neck hurts. It is a real pain in the arse. I don't have proper lighting, I cannot have a workstation at home where all my shit can lie around; I carry books around, sit in my friend's flat while she is at her boyfriend's place, she is off sick, moving around with my stuff and then I think: Okay this is how things are right now, what can I do to make the thesis process different, but I cannot do my yoga, strengthen my back, sit on a ball because... I cannot go shopping, the yoga centres are closed, I cannot work out, I am not allowed... sigh... to take my mind off all of these thoughts racing around my head by meeting with friends, other than taking a socially distanced evening stroll when I have put my child to bed. Um, I just feel like I'm in a really tight spot, despite having an

incredibly supportive husband and a bloody great kid who luckily are not ill, and I am struck by this kind of first-world frame of mind, like, luckily I am not afraid of any of us getting corona; luckily we are all fit and healthy ...I am just afraid how this is going to affect us all, like...I am not afraid of the disease...I am scared what it can do to us, being put in a situation of total isolation where it really, really puts a strain on us.

About the Authors:

Helle Merete Nordentoft is an associate professor in guidance and counselling at the Department of Educational Science at Aarhus University, Denmark. She researches collective, interdisciplinary interactions and counselling practices in health care and educational settings. In her research, she uses participatory and visual qualitative methodological approaches from micro-sociological and sociocultural perspectives. Her ambition is to understand how diversity and, recently, GAI become drivers in students' and practitioners' critical reflexive learning processes.

Pia Seidler Cort is an associate professor at the Department of Educational Science at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her main fields of research are lifelong learning and lifelong guidance, with an emphasis on adult education and vocational education and training. She is interested in exploring the relationship between policy and practice and the implications of policy for organisations, professionals, and individuals. In recent years, she has gained an interest in temporal aspects of policy and practice, exploring the relationship between different temporal conceptualisations and rhythms.

Anne Larson is an associate professor at the Department of Educational Sociology at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her main research areas are education policy, adult education, and lifelong learning. She is interested in the relationship between different policy levels, e.g., transnational and national policy, and in how policy affects everyday life in organisations and individuals. With many years of experience as a university lecturer, she has recently become increasingly interested in how education policy shapes students' conditions.