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Working class emotional practices

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Emotional reflexivity in the time of COVID-19: working-class emotional practices

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We share findings from a qualitative study on emotions in Scottish working-class households during lockdown. The results challenge existing research focused on emotional capital, which often suggests that working-class people struggle to provide emotional resources to those close to them. Using the concept of emotional reflexivity we show how these household members cared for each other's feelings, challenging deficit views of working-class emotionality. This research offers a novel understanding of working-class participants collaboratively making space for each other to feel, many favouring acts of care rather than talking. The COVID-19 lockdown, however, tended to reinforce gendered practices of emotion work, although some participants drew on emotional support beyond the household to try to mitigate this burden. The emotionally reflexive practices seen in these households suggest that sustaining more equality in emotional wellbeing relies on navigating material circumstances, is not always about verbal sharing, is often an interactional achievement, but also means resisting unrealistic expectations of intimate relationships within households as the fountainhead of all emotional succour.

Key words COVID-19 • emotional reflexivity • emotional capital • Scotland • working class • households

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic enforced periods of proximity for families and households, with impacts on their emotions and relationships (Thomson, 2021). The broad aim of this article is to understand how members of Scottish working-class 'households'² emotionally navigated the enforced closeness of lockdown during the pandemic. While the concept of class remains slippery, participants self-identified as working

class, but also broadly fitted within that category on the basis of [Savage et al's \(2013\)](#) capitals, assets and resources (CAR) classification model. We understand their feelings and practices in terms of emotional reflexivity: the relational process of reflecting on feelings and using those reflections to act ([Holmes, 2010](#)). This provides an alternative to the Bourdieusian-based concept of emotional capital that describes how people use emotional resources to 'profit' themselves and others (for example, [Nowotny, 1981](#); [Reay 2004](#)). We focus on working-class households, given the evidence that they were significantly more negatively affected by COVID-19 in terms of physical, mental and financial health ([Marmot and Allen, 2020](#); [SAGE, 2020](#)). Attention to how working-class households navigated these impacts is important in understanding how to foster collective, not just individual, wellbeing and in mitigating social inequalities beyond the pandemic. It is also important as a further challenge to deficit models of working-class people as excessively or inappropriately emotional and as lacking in emotional capital ([Reay, 2004](#); [Skeggs, 2005](#); [Gillies, 2006](#); [McQueen and Osborn, 2020](#)).

This article marshals insights from thinking about emotional reflexivity ([Holmes, 2010](#); [Brownlie, 2011](#); [Burkitt, 2012](#)) to make sense of the ways in which members of working-class households understood and managed their own feelings and those of their intimates during lockdown. The first lockdown in Scotland lasted from late March to early May 2020. After a tightening of restrictions over the festive period of 2020 to limit household mixing, mainland Scotland was put in its second lockdown on 5 January 2021. The 'stay at home' order was imposed, and non-essential services were halted and businesses closed; working from home became the default unless unable to do so, college and university students were to be taught exclusively online, and households were no longer to mix. While some restrictions were eased, the second lockdown was not totally lifted until 19 July 2021. This research was conducted during the 2021 lockdown. For these Scottish working-class households, intimacy could be challenging during the prolonged togetherness of lockdown and emotionally difficult to navigate where there was limited space in the house. In their emotionally reflexive navigations of intimacy in these circumstances, many women found amplified gendered expectations of them as chief emotion workers. Yet the pandemic also highlighted the importance of non-verbal forms of emotional care within households and the value of emotional support from those outside them. Although there was considerable attention to the rise in domestic violence against women during lockdowns and across all social classes ([Stripe, 2020](#)), our data attend to rather different experiences in which members of working-class households found ways to give each other 'space' to manage emotions in non-violent ways. While acts of care were important for all, as well as talking, women's gendered emotional responsibilities increased. Emotional support networks beyond the household, also played a crucial role in emotional wellbeing. Lockdown provided an opportunity to examine how working-class households reflected on, and (sometimes) achieved, emotionally fulfilling and caring connections to intimate others. We highlight how this was often a collective enterprise.

Emotional reflexivity as an alternative to emotional capital

Literature on working-class emotionality has typically employed the concept of emotional capital. Emotional capital is an evolution of the term 'social capital' that

Helga Nowotny (1981) first used to explore the affective resources such as skills, attention, care and time that families, and especially women, generate, and that are emotionally valued by different class groups (Reay, 2004). Feminist sociologists such as Diane Reay (2004) and Val Gilles (2006), for example, have examined how working-class mothers try to emotionally resource their children to achieve educational success or to protect them from feelings of failure within an unjust system. Bev Skeggs (1997) considered why working-class women may struggle to translate the emotional capital of women's supposed 'natural' ability to care into other forms of capital. Despite the best efforts of these writers, the use of this concept makes it difficult to escape a deficit model of working-class emotional practices.

In focusing on emotional capital emotions are treated as resources that working-class individuals lack and cannot use to 'invest' in others. Reay defines emotional capital as 'the emotional resources you hand on to those you care about'. She argues that most working-class mothers in her research were 'getting so depressed about their financial situation they found it impossible to find the emotional space to support their children's education' (Reay, 2004: 60, 70). Despite highlighting how class inequalities cause emotional distress, and are perpetuated by it, the lack *sticks* (Ahmed, 2007) to working-class mothers whom Reay, and others, represent as unable to emotionally provide in ways that will 'profit' their children. As Gillies (2006: 283) argues, much scholarship on working-class emotional capital acknowledges the challenges of poverty, but shows 'little recognition of the strengths and values that are also generated' within working-class households. Cottingham (2021: 256) argues that one possible antidote is to distinguish emotional capital as a resource from its activation. She criticises Gillies's use of mothers' concern for children as a marker for emotional capital and Reay's conflation of emotional capital with mothers' experiences of schooling. Instead, Cottingham explores how people put emotional capital into practice. She argues that alongside the primary emotional capital gained in early socialisation adults can acquire emotional capital in secondary socialisation within occupations or subcultures; as, for example, happens with male nurses or members of alternative movements (Cottingham, 2021; Nica, 2022). Regarding emotions as a resource that people must activate allows for greater agency and social change, but the Bourdieusian framing still suggests that activating emotional capital will be difficult without other forms of capital to exchange to acquire it and put it to profitable work. This makes it difficult to explain how working-class people can generate 'strengths and values' in the face of inequality. Understanding this requires rejecting the idea that emotions are resources that individuals have or acquire.

Emotional reflexivity is an alternative concept that avoids seeing working-class emotional practices as deficient because of its focus on emotions as produced in interaction. Recent scholarly attention to the increasing importance of emotions in the relational and reflexive constitution of self and the social (Archer, 2000; Brownlie, 2011; Burkitt, 2012; 2014; Holmes and McKenzie, 2019; Lerner and Rivkin-Fish, 2021) highlights how feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979) are disrupted in diverse, rapidly changing societies. Individuals have to be reflexive about how to feel and act in relation to others and to shifting social norms and power hierarchies (Wouters, 2008). These ideas draw on thinking about the internal conversation, which describes the often emotional ways in which people imagine interactions with significant (usually intimate) or generalised others (Mead, 1925: 274; 1934/1962: 138, 141–2). Those intimate and nearby are important but emotional connections are also maintained

through inner dialogues, and felt connections, with those physically distant, no longer living, or even imagined (Hepworth and Featherstone, 1974; Roseneil, 2009; Barnwell, 2019). However, to speak of using internal and external ‘conversations’ to make one’s way through the world (Archer, 2003), may over-emphasise the importance of talk as an emotional practice. In some contexts, emotionalisation processes are less entwined with psychologisation and therapeutic emphasis on verbal expression (Illouz, 2007; Brownlie, 2014; Lerner and Rivkin-Fish, 2021).

An understanding of emotional reflexivity as including non-verbal forms of dialogue and interaction is key to challenging the way working-class emotional practices are often denigrated. Since Freud advocated the ‘talking cure’, the culturally influential psy disciplines have tended to privilege verbal sharing of emotions as key to mental health and working-class people have been found wanting (Gillies, 2006: 283; McQueen and Osborn, 2020). Some studies which included Scottish working-class participants suggest that disclosure has become the primary, but not only, form of emotion work (McQueen and Osborn, 2020; McQueen, 2022). However, Brownlie (2011) brilliantly analysed the importance of ‘being there’ for British people as a reflexive, non-verbal form of emotional support. We argue that these non-verbal forms need more attention. Ian Burkitt (2012) uses the term ‘dialogue’ to theorise other kinds of interaction as vital to emotional reflexivity, including more aesthetic or embodied imaginings of ourselves in relation to how others see us. Also important is practical care that meets bodily needs. This is central to most intimate relationships, whether it involves making cups of tea, helping others bathe or other assistance (Jamieson, 1998; Gabb and Fink, 2015), much of it consists of more interdependent exchanges of support (Beasley and Bacchi, 2012). Some care has more of an emotional than embodied emphasis. The example of making tea stands in for a whole range of everyday mutual practices through which significant intimates take turns to care (Gabb and Fink, 2015). These can be read as acts of kindness, alongside other ways of ‘being there’ that are more obviously about emotional support than care of proximate bodies (Brownlie, 2014; Thomson 2021). Women continue to do most of the caring and emotion work (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; Jamieson, 1998; Duncan et al, 2003; Bowlby et al, 2010; McQueen, 2022) and through the concept of emotional reflexivity we can recognise the doing of embodied and emotional intimacy as a relational, if asymmetrical, achievement.

By looking at emotional reflexivity we can see how working-class households managed the amplification of emotions caused by the pandemic, in often unequal ways. Lockdowns put extra burdens of care and emotion work onto women, especially working mothers, in the UK and elsewhere (see for example Clark et al, 2021; Summers, 2021; Zamberlan et al, 2021). Randall Collins (2020) observed US families with small children appearing more often on streets and in parks and speculated that they seemed happier, the supposed result of spending more time together in focused face-to-face interaction. While there may have been similar positives for some Scottish households, there were also uneven burdens of care that were not passively endured, but actively navigated. We make sense of that navigation by departing from common ideas about individuals internally producing emotions before expressing them socially (Burkitt, 1997: 41). Feeling, interacting human beings reflexively *achieve* emotions both within and among themselves. What people feel then feeds back into the production of embodied selves, forms of intimacy and wider social relations (Holmes and McKenzie, 2019). These emotional-relational-embodied processes previously followed classed, gendered

or 'sexual' scripts, or sets of feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979; Gagnon and Simon, 2005), but rapid social change unsettles those scripts and rules and thus reflexivity is increasingly required in emotional practices (Archer, 2003; Wouters, 2008; Holmes, 2010; Lerner and Rivkin-Fish, 2021). From this may arise opportunities to do emotions and intimacy differently. The illustrations later in the article are of emotional practices in some working-class households where the COVID-19 lockdown highlighted the need for emotional reflexivity in managing intimacy. We argue that working-class people are not lacking emotional capital or 'emotional competence' (Illouz, 2007: 69–71). In the households we studied they exercised emotional reflexivity. They made space for each other's feelings, through talk and through acts of care. They reflected and acted on gendered inequalities relating to emotion work, sometimes reaching beyond the household in efforts to alleviate them. Thus, they relationally made sense of emotions, and often successfully managed them during lockdown.

To see emotional reflexivity as relational eschews much-criticised arguments about individualisation as an alleged disembedding from social relationships (see Jamieson, 1999). Barbalet (2019: 135) suggests that late modernity is characterised by individuation, not individualisation, the former fostering a disposition towards self-management as individuals experience 'changes in the ways in which individuals relate with others in the arrangements of the institutions and organization which provide the basis of their social existence, including family, kinship, gender and class'. As social conditions change there may be 'a predominance of emotions pertaining to self as an interior phenomenon' (Barbalet, 2019: 135), but that is a social artefact. We continue to learn emotional reflexivity (for example, through work [Cottingham, 2021]), and 'our ways of learning to be emotional are mediated through the relationships we have throughout our lives' (Brownlie, 2014: 166). Illouz's (2007) argument about the working classes having less satisfying relationships, and as less likely to have reflexive skills because their jobs did not demand them, was based on participants socialised in the twentieth century when articulate emotional expression was less expected (Lerner and Rivkin-Fish, 2021). However, Illouz's work was also based on limited empirical data (Brownlie, 2014: 14–15) and highlighted individualised, therapeutic, emotional disclosure, ignoring the importance of non-talk-based reflexivity illustrated by Brownlie (2014; see also Cancian, 1986). Most literature, following Hochschild (1979; 1983), also conceives of emotion management as an individualised and largely interior working on one's own emotions by individuals, to make them fit feeling rules. This underemphasises the relational or collective nature of emotional reflexivity as a practice of interactively identifying and modifying emotions in interaction with present, imagined or generalised others. Emotion management is often collective, sometimes collaborative.

The study

This article is based on a research project that assessed the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on emotional reflexivity in working-class households in central Scotland. The second author of this article conducted nine one-to-one interviews and three joint interviews with partners. The 15 participants were recruited through snowball sampling, starting from the second author's personal networks, as participation from working-class groups is more likely to come through informal personal contact (Crow et al, 2006).

We determined the social class of participants using their self-identification, alongside [Savage et al's \(2013\)](#) CAR classification model. This model helps us highlight how different classes come differently equipped to perform reflexive emotion work, but is allied to understandings of class as capital accumulation ([Connelly et al, 2021](#)). However, it is useful in our efforts to examine the relational conceptualisation of emotions as reflexively shared, albeit we may differ in theorising that sharing – not as part of habitus but as an interactional achievement, a form of emotional practice.

The sample recruited were White, predominantly under 24, and included one new affluent worker, ten emerging service workers and four members of the traditional working-class. The youthfulness of the sample contributed to the diversity in living situations within the study: participants living with family, friends, partners or flat mates. These young participants were socialised within an emotionalised society that encourages emotional skills more than in the past ([Holmes, 2010](#); [Lerner and Rivkin-Fish, 2021](#)). This may account for some of the findings about facility in emotional reflexivity. In [Table 1](#) we can see their other attributes, including how they self-identified in class terms.

Interviews allowed us to focus on people's own narratives and see how they are emotionally reflexive ([Holmes, 2015a](#); [Mason, 2017](#)). The project was approved via the University of Edinburgh's ethical audit processes. We designed interviews so that participants could volunteer information and did not feel obliged to share upsetting experiences, such as domestic violence or mental health issues. The researcher provided information about support helplines, but no such revelations occurred. Participants' details were anonymised and confidentiality maintained through pseudonyms, by not revealing the exact location of the research, and by referring to non-participating family members only as 'mother' or 'father'.

Interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams during the second lockdown at the beginning of 2021. We thus observed participants at home, where the social action being studied occurred ([James and Busher, 2009](#)). Our thematic analysis paid particular attention to the emotion words used ([Holmes, 2015a](#): 63). This is a

Table 1: Breakdown of sample

Breakdown of sample	
Total	15
Gender	
Female	12
Male	3
Age	
18–24	13
25–34	1
45–54	1
Ethnicity	
White	15
Social class group (self-identified)	
Lower working class	2
Middle working class	7
Upper working class	6

small study, and experiences may have differed in households elsewhere. However, by reading the experiences of these working-class households during lockdown in conjunction with the theoretical framework outlined, we help challenge models portraying working-class people as lacking emotional capital. We provide evidence of working-class people as skilled in emotional reflexivity and raise questions about how both talk and non-talk based emotional practices relate to gendered inequalities in emotion work.

Making space together to feel

Lockdowns required emotional reflexivity as working-class households navigated their feelings within small living environments. The COVID-19 pandemic forced people inside their homes, where a lack of physical space altered relationships within these working-class households and exposed members to one another's emotions. As Thomas remarked:

'I do notice that when we're all cooped up, especially if there's long stretches where we're all in the house, like maybe I'll have a few days off and you will at the same time, we do argue more. It's hard to escape how the other person is feeling, especially because we're living in the same room as each other.'

The participants found it 'hard to escape' the other person's feelings when confined to the limited space of their home. Similarly, Melissa, who lived in a flat with her boyfriend, was initially glad to have extra time to spend together, but as lockdown went on, it became challenging "being in each other's pockets all the time". All but two participants described their relationships with their household members as emotionally close, but in the pandemic, they found their own and others' emotions more difficult to manage and navigate, requiring more emotional reflexivity.

Melissa's phrase 'in each other's pockets all the time', illuminates how the lack of space in her flat negatively affected her relationship and caused more arguments: "It's definitely different. We've been having more arguments than what we would have normally but not mental arguments where we're screaming and bawling at each other, it's more just been about how we're feeling."

Melissa was reflexive about the impact of lack of space on the emotions of herself and her partner. She identified that they needed space from one another and that being without it contributed to difficulties in their relationship. She explicitly said that their arguments did not involve "screaming and bawling", but that their confinement increased conflict between them. She suggested that "if [they] were in a house with an upstairs and downstairs" rather than working in the same room together and hearing each other on telephone calls, it would be easier. Melissa echoed the feelings of many of the participants. In seven of the individual interviews and two of the joint interviews, participants said they were glad to have more time to spend together with their households. However, both pairs and six of the individual interviewees countered this by saying that being in the same space together for too long had created tension in the relationship and led to bickering. For example, Sarah said of herself and her five flat mates: "When we're all kind of stuck together, there's a lot more bickering and arguments and frustrations. But at the same time, we have got a

lot closer.” Similarly to Melissa, Sarah reflected on how lockdown caused frustrations but also brought them together emotionally.

For Sarah, like many other participants, her reflexivity about the emotional impact of limited room for privacy on her relationships resulted in her creating more space: “If it’s good for that one person, if they need to spend some time alone, we’ll let them do that because then that’s easier than it bringing everyone else down.” Sarah exemplifies the use of emotional reflexivity to recognise when a flat mate needed space and suggested a collective aspect to that reflexivity when she said “we’ll let them do that” to avoid their feelings affecting everyone else. However, finding ‘space’ was not always easy.

Emotional reflexivity meant interactively interpreting and acting on emotions within the constraints of one’s material circumstances. Given the restrictions of the pandemic and the stay-at-home order, giving one another space was often limited to going to work, going for a walk or moving to another part of the house. Those with smaller living quarters had fewer options. For example, Jennifer discussed how she would “literally take [herself] out of the space and go into another room” when she felt she needed some space from her family. Catherine, who shared a room with her boyfriend Thomas in his parents’ house, discussed how she “can’t just shut the bedroom door and be by [her]self ’cause it’s Thomas’s room too”, so she tried to “get outside as much as possible” or they walked the dog separately. Thomas said if he can “tell Catherine needs space” he might “go sit in the living room”. Despite few options for giving one another space, participants found ways to reflexively navigate each other’s emotional needs. The examples above demonstrate participants recognising, assessing and attending to the emotions of significant others in supportive ways.

Emotional reflexivity and gendered divisions of emotion work

For the working-class households in this study, the COVID-19 pandemic promoted emotional reflexivity about other practical acts of care, apart from giving one another space. Thirteen of the 15 participants reported that they received and performed acts of care with their household members during the pandemic. All 13 reported that their relationships with their household members had improved to varying degrees. They attributed this improvement to the increased attention they paid to one another’s emotional needs through acts of care. Melissa explained that she provided acts of care to her partner when she noticed his mood was low, to “just to like make things seem better, like make life a wee bit easier for him”. She would “just make dinner for him, and ... just tidy up the flat”. When asked if her partner also performed acts of care for her, Melissa said: “He literally runs about after me all the time when I’m feeling shit ... like see even yesterday, it was his day off and he came in and was like I’ll make French toast, just you sit down, I’ll bring you coffee.”

Melissa and her partner reciprocally exchanged acts of care as a collaborative emotion management strategy. They demonstrated emotional reflexivity as they acted on intersubjective interpretations of one another’s emotions to make each other feel better. They were also reflexive in identifying changes in emotionality following the provision of acts of care. As a couple, they were capable of being reflexive in this way because of the intimate knowledge they shared about one another, resulting from the closeness of their relationship. Having the intimate knowledge to identify

household members' emotions was observable in how all 13 participants discussed experiencing acts of care.

The acts of care observed here critically extend Gabb and Fink's (2015: 17–37) concept of relationship work, showing that it is done not just by couples and often involves collaboration. Gabb and Fink (2015: 24) define relationship work as 'the everyday practices that couples do to sustain their relationships and the material conditions that shape their personal lives'. Thoughtful gestures (household chores, cooking, cups of tea) and tangible gifts were important to both their research participants and ours. For Gabb and Fink's participants, these acts were important because they demonstrated intimate couple knowledge, highly valued in romantic relationships. However, our research shows the significance of caring acts within other relationships: parents and children, siblings and flat mates. Furthermore, Gabb and Fink make no mention of the role of emotional reflexivity or social class in their concept of relationship work. Our research suggests that these acts of care are emotional practices of 'being there' for others. Brownlie (2011) describes 'being there' as non-talk practices of emotion management that draw on emotional reflexivity. She outlines how people are reflexive when performing practices such as acts of care as they assess the experiences and use of emotions in these encounters of giving and receiving. The emotionally reflexive acts of care evident in the examples above challenge claims that working-class people are lacking in emotional capital and thus unable to provide useful emotional support for others. The acts of care demonstrated how the participants were often very competent in using their reflexive analyses to positively manage their own and others' emotions within their household.

We note the collective nature of much emotional reflexivity among the working-class participants in our study. To what degree this collaboration is particular to, or made necessary by, contexts of socioeconomic disadvantage requires more research. We suggest, following Brownlie (2014), that the practices our participants described are not some poor cousin to more individualised, discursive or therapeutic ways of providing emotional support. They are often enriching and usually effective for these households.

Some of this may be attributable to the youthful sample, socialised within an emotionalised society in which '[e]vents are evaluated in terms of the emotional condition of the feeling subject, whether an individual or collective' (Lerner and Rivkin-Fish, 2021: 3). It is also notable that two thirds of the sample are emerging service workers, likely to be socialised into emotional reflexivity as part of their jobs (Cottingham, 2021). The collaborative response may be particularly necessary among the working class, given that they may not be able to afford access to more individualised forms of support like therapy. However, Brownlie (2014) has shown that often undervalued forms of everyday kindness are vital to helping people of all classes get by. Our study shows how that is true within these working-class households. What a focus on emotional capital does is to assume that emotions are an individual resource depleted by not having enough economic or other kinds of capital. This assumes that people cannot enrich others emotionally if they are emotionally depleted. To examine emotional reflexivity is to see emotions not as a finite resource but as a constant relational creation of human beings. A focus on emotional reflexivity explains how emotions are done in interaction, and how reflecting on, interpreting and managing emotions together can produce emotionally supportive solutions despite cramped living conditions or other material inadequacies.

However, lockdown seemed to reinforce gendered divisions of emotion work in these households, with women seen as emotional experts and responsible for emotion work. Stereotypical and scholarly conceptualisations of men, especially working-class men, as deficient in ‘emotional competence’ (Illouz, 2007: 69–70), are often based on a privileging of verbal emotional disclosure, at which women are supposed to be more skilled (Cancian 1986). These ideas still need challenging (Holmes, 2015b; de Boise and Hearn, 2017; McQueen and Osborn, 2020; Cottingham, 2021). McQueen (2022) has argued that while men, including working-class men, follow new feeling rules expecting them to emotionally support female partners, women still do the relational work to help men express their emotions. We similarly found that the men in our study were emotionally reflexive in recognising and acting on their own and others’ emotions, but within limits. Three of the interviewees were men, and all recounted some experience of emotional reflexivity; usually speaking of difficulties managing their emotions during lockdown. However, the men were careful in how they presented their feelings and tried to maintain a composed demeanour to seem in control of their emotions. For example, Thomas, who was interviewed with his girlfriend Catherine, claimed he was more emotionally expressive than Catherine:

Thomas: I just prefer to speak about things. I think like with my family and that, we’ve just always been like that – if there’s a problem, we voice it. I don’t really know why that is but I’d just rather speak about it straight away, I’m quite open like that but then I don’t get massively bothered by most things. You are definitely not like that [they both laugh],

Catherine: Yeah, no. I do just bottle things up until I explode.

Despite the pair agreeing that Thomas was more open about his emotions, he also said he does not get overly emotional. All three men did this – they countered their discussion of being emotional with statements that implied the opposite. Thomas was the only one who said that he would reach out to others for help with his emotions. When asked, the other two men said they were unlikely to speak to their households about their emotions. This is perhaps because the other two men refuted that they were ever so emotional that they would need help. Meanwhile, over half of the women in the study complained of how the emotional silence of men in their households frustrated their desires for emotional communication and participation in their relationships. Of the 12 women interviewed, ten lived with at least one man at some point during the COVID-19 lockdown, including romantic partners, friends and family members. Of those ten women, seven reported that men in their households were emotionally closed off. For example, when Jennifer was asked whether her flat mate was good at communicating how he feels, she bluntly replied: “No. [laughs] He can be quite emotionless at times.”

Jennifer’s experience echoed many of the other women’s frustration with emotional silence from their male household members. This suggests that women participants desired forms of emotional reflexivity that included talking about emotions as well as acts of care. What the women discussed is similar to the asymmetry of emotional openness between men and women in romantic relationships reported by Duncombe and Marsden (1993; see also Cancian, 1986; Erickson, 2005), and more recently by McQueen and Osborn (2020) who also dismiss Illouz’s argument that working-class men are less positive about emotional openness than middle-class men. However, the

women in our study said that their male partners limited their emotional participation in the relationship by avoiding discussing emotions. The women instead took on the management of their male household members' emotions as well as their own. Melissa's assertion that she could identify her partner's emotions before he vocalised them exemplifies this: "He gets driven nuts by me asking 'Are you ok?' But eventually like two weeks later he will say 'Yeah, a couple weeks ago I wasn't feeling that great,' and I'll be like [sarcastically, nodding dramatically] 'Yes, I know, let's talk about it.'"

Melissa implied here that she has greater emotional expertise than her partner, as she believed she could identify changes in his emotionality better than he did. This is indicative of a wider trend across the women participants, where they claimed to know the men's emotions despite the men not communicating them and felt responsible for helping their male household members to manage their emotions. Therefore, the women in this study adopted the traditional idea of women as emotionally expert (Cancian, 1986), and they bore the brunt of the increased emotional demands of the pandemic, feeling they had to take on managing the emotions of themselves and their household members, especially in the face of the men's emotional silence.

Nevertheless, COVID-19 lockdown tested these men's emotional control and gave them more opportunities to reflect on and express their emotions. They retold experiences of particularly emotional moments during the pandemic. These men are not inherently unemotional or incapable of emotional reflexivity, but they worked to present themselves as emotionally controlled. The women did express some commitment to therapeutic ideals of verbal emotional disclosure (cf. Illouz, 2008; Brownlie, 2014; McQueen and Osborn, 2020) and so tried to get men to talk about their feelings more. Therefore, the working-class people in this study did emotional reflexivity in ways that showed awareness of, but struggled to overcome, gendered stereotypes of men as emotionally incommunicative and women as emotionally articulate. The lack of physical and emotional space to deal with emotions during the pandemic seemed to exacerbate this gendered clash of emotional styles, but also showed working-class men trying to make changes. Meanwhile, looking outside the household for support was important for dealing with the unequal emotional burden on women participants.

Emotional support beyond the household

While our study shows that significant others who share households are important sources of verbal and non-verbal emotional support, participants often sought out other avenues. Seven of the participants – all women – sought emotional support from friendships and other close relationships outside of the home. For example, when asked if they would go to one another for emotional support, Katie and Gillian, two sisters together living with their mother, said:

Gillian: We do have the type of house where it's just like if there's something bothering you, you just say.

[...]

Katie: Nah, I don't know. [pauses] I do think sometimes if it's something maybe like a bit deeper, I probably wouldn't just announce it to everyone. Especially with Mum.

The pair then discussed how Katie avoided telling her mother about her recent relationship breakdown. Katie turned to her friends first when she was struggling to deal with her ex-partner's behaviour at the end of their relationship:

Katie: Aye, I didn't tell Mum for like a week. [laughing]

Interviewer: Why did you not tell her?

Katie: Eh ... It just would've been way more hassle than it was worth. I just really didn't want to be asked 400 questions about it, when I was still kind of coming to terms with it myself [details ex-partner's behaviour]. I didn't want to give Mum all the reasons why and stuff. I told my friends first, then I did tell [Mum] eventually, but I just didn't want Mum to know straight away. Just until I had processed it. ... I think it was easier to tell my friends because they're my age, but like as much as me and mum are close, it would've made me feel worse telling her because she would worry and freak out and I couldn't cope with it. I do tell her a lot usually.

Katie reflexively assessed her emotional needs, sought out friends she thought would best support her through her relationship breakdown, and thought about how to save her mother worrying. She identified the supportive qualities of her friendships outside her home as unlike those her mother provided. Such examples show these working-class people's emotional reflexivity as they carefully reflect and act on their assessments of their own and others' emotions. Friendships outside the home can have strong emotional and supportive bonds (Spencer and Pahl, 2006), and avoid some of the 'hassles' of sharing emotions with those within the household who might be too close and 'freak out'.

Participants also turned for support to relationships outside their household when they had issues with household members. Taylor lived with her parents and two siblings and when asked if she would go to her family for support on non-work-related issues, she said:

Taylor: Sometimes and sometimes not. It depends on whether I feel like it needs to be said. If not, I just leave it. Sometimes as well, if I'm annoyed at my family, I don't necessarily want to tell them, especially if it's not really a big deal. Like sometimes there's no need to be like 'You really annoyed me when you blah blah blah,' because it'll cause more issues, sometimes you just need to complain to someone else for a bit just to get it out.

Interviewer: Who do you complain to?

Taylor: Probably my friends. Maybe my aunt and uncle, it just depends really.

Taylor demonstrated an awareness about the potential impact of emotionally charged discussions on her relationship with her family and therefore made judgements about what issues need to be discussed and what can be let go. She demonstrated that she had other relationships, such as her friends or her aunt and uncle, who she can "get it out" with. Taylor still utilised a talking-based method of emotional support but with non-household relationships. Catherine also discussed going to outside-the-home relationships for emotional support. She had begun living with Thomas and his family at the start of the first lockdown, and had to navigate these relationships carefully:

‘Obviously like, it’s not like they do anything that really bothers me that much and we do get on, but I maybe can’t go to his mum or his brother if they do something that annoys me because I feel like I’m still technically a guest in this house and I’d feel rude. In the same way, though, I wouldn’t go to his mum if Thomas done something because firstly, it’s her son, and we do get on but I don’t think I could do that ... But like I think the stress of like everything going on just now, not being in my own home, and then other stuff that’s going on, you just need someone else to talk to sometimes that’s not the same people you see 24/7, like my friends or people from work or something.’

Catherine’s living situation highlights how the relationships you have with your household may not necessarily be emotionally close or long-standing relationships, which makes seeking emotional support from these people difficult. Catherine felt she did not have the type of relationship with Thomas’s family where she could approach them with issues. Therefore, Catherine was reflexive about her need for relationships outside of the household to provide her with emotional support during the pandemic, like her friends or work colleagues.

Some participants sought out alternative support systems outside their household because they were reflexive about the extra emotional burden of COVID-19 on household members. The COVID-19 pandemic has been conceptualised as a highly emotionalised event, with intense emotionalisation discourse pervading the public domain (Lerner and Rivkin-Fish, 2021: 3–5). Three of the participants, Jennifer, Isabelle and Michelle, discussed how they went elsewhere for emotional support as they were concerned about the impact of sharing their emotions on their family members. COVID-19 heightened their concern because they identified it as a time of high emotionality and difficulty for their households. For example, Michelle discussed how she typically sought emotional support from her mother. However, she was aware that her mother was struggling with life events exacerbated by the conditions of the pandemic, so went to her boyfriend instead:

Interviewer: Because you knew your mum was going through a lot, would you ever change the way you would go about telling her things?

Michelle: Definitely. I’m very open with my mum, but if you care about someone and you have bad news, but you know they’re going through a hard time as well, you wouldn’t necessarily tell them ... if I was having a bad day, I would more probably tell my boyfriend rather than my mum, whereas normally I’d probably direct it to my mum. I think people are more considerate of everyone’s feelings just now.

As Michelle suggests, COVID-19 seems to have made people more considerate of each other’s feelings. However, she is the only one who mentions reaching out to men rather than other women. These examples highlight that relationships with significant others in households are not always our first port of call for emotional support. However, it seems that women in other households are often the next choice and so these examples of emotional reflexivity may have little effect on redistributing the burden of emotion work that women experience.

Conclusion: emotional reflexivity in the time of COVID-19

The COVID-19 lockdowns allowed an evaluation of how working-class household members interactively used emotional reflexivity to manage their feelings in uncertain times. Rather than understand working-class emotional practices in terms of a lack of emotional capital, we have employed the concept of emotional reflexivity. This concept turns away from work on emotional capital that understands emotions as (individual) resources that working-class people struggle to acquire and pass on. To focus on emotional reflexivity is to understand emotions as an interactional achievement, but as one that requires effort and is impeded by inequalities. The COVID-19 stay-at-home orders threw ‘households’ together and this could be hard for working-class households with limited living accommodation. However, our participants reflected on the emotional impacts of ‘being in each other’s pockets’ and found supportive ways to make space for each other’s feelings. Reay (2004) suggests emotional capital is typically something working-class people struggle to share to enrich affective relationships with family and friends. In contrast, the working-class participants in this study use emotional reflexivity to provide support within varied living arrangements involving kin, friends and flat mates.

Both men and women were emotionally reflexive in performing acts of care for each other that were highly valued for helping them make it through the pandemic. However, these lockdowns also appeared to reinforce gender inequalities, especially those in relation to verbal forms of emotion work. Nevertheless, these men as well as women worked hard to respect the feelings of others, showing considerable skill in their emotional practices, contrary to earlier literature suggesting a lack of emotional competence (for example, Illouz, 2007: 69–71). Given that the participants are young this may be partly the result of processes of emotionalisation which increasingly imbue and require such reflexivity (Holmes, 2010; Lerner and Rivkin-Fish, 2021). The emotional reflexivity displayed was considerate and often involved working with others both within and outside the household. Much of it was non-verbal. The men’s emotional reflexivity suggested they preferred non-verbal ways of showing emotional support and struggled to navigate away from expectations that they appear in control of their emotions. Many of the women expressed frustration with the men’s reluctance to talk about their feelings and often took responsibility for managing the men’s as well as their own emotions. Some women were aware of the burden that disclosing feelings could have on household members and were reflexive about what they disclosed to whom. Having emotional support outside the household was important, but mostly they turned to other women and thus the asymmetry in gendered divisions of emotion work was only slightly troubled.

Our study provides an alternative to deficit models of working-class emotional practices. It adds to the literature about practical acts of care as a key form of relationship work between couples, by showing its importance as a form of emotional reflexivity in other household relationships. Our study also highlights how emotional reflexivity is often an interactive achievement, something people do together. We suggest that more research on men’s emotionally supportive relationships outside the household seems crucial if we are to find ways to alleviate gender inequalities in emotion work. However, the working-class women and men in this study are often successful in using relational forms of emotional reflexivity to provide valued emotional support within intimate relationships.

Notes

¹ Rebecca Thomson conducted the empirical research in this article for her Master's dissertation, supervised by Mary Holmes. Mary provided some of the theoretical framing for the article, but Rebecca did the initial thematic analysis of the data. Both authors contributed to the writing of the article, and developed the analysis presented. The alphabetical order of their names thus reflects their equal contributions to this joint work.

² The pandemic has reinvigorated discussion about the concept of the household, and who is included in this definition. The development of stay-at-home guidelines required a simplified, clear definition of who is included in a household amid the uncertainty of the pandemic. Therefore, the UK Health Security Agency (2021) issued a definition of a household as one person living alone, a group of people living together (who may or may not be related) and sharing facilities, or a group living a nomadic lifestyle together. For the purposes of this research, we worked with the definition of a household as at least two people living together who may or may not be related but hold some sort of relationship to one another. We use the term 'household members' to distinguish people living together within one home.

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Conflict of interest

The first author is co-chief editor of the journal, but the article was handled by another editor and blind peer-reviewed.

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