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Special Issue Reprint

Gender, Work and Family in Turbulent Times

COVID-19, Remote Work and Diversity

Edited by
Jerry A. Jacobs

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Gender, Work and Family in Turbulent Times: COVID-19, Remote Work and Diversity

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Guest Editor

Jerry A. Jacobs

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Guest Editor
Jerry A. Jacobs
Department of Sociology
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia
United States

Editorial Office
MDPI AG
Grosspeteranlage 5
4052 Basel, Switzerland

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About the Editor

Jerry A. Jacobs

Jerry A. Jacobs, Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, is the co-founder and first president of the Work and Family Researchers Network. Jacobs has served as Editor of the American Sociological Review, President of the Eastern Sociological Society, and co-President of Sociologists for Women in Society, and has won several awards for scholarship and professional contributions. Jacobs has written extensively about women's careers and work-family issues. His books include *The Time Divide: Work, Family and Gender Inequality* (2004) with Kathleen Gerson, *The Changing Face of Medicine: Women Doctors and the Evolution of Health Care in America* (2008) with Ann Boulis, and *Revolving Doors: Sex Segregation and Women's Careers* (1989). His current projects include a study of technology and elder care and a multi-faceted exploration of the future of work.

Preface

The chapters in this collection were organized based on three themes. While all of the papers are about work and family in one way or another, the first four papers following the introduction focus on work. The following set of four papers examines the shifting division of labor in the household, with a special emphasis on whether men's contributions changed during the pandemic. The final set of four papers puts family life at center stage. The introduction highlights some of the key findings in this diverse collection of papers and makes the case for continuing to map out the various responses to the pandemic as well as the enduring impact of this event on children, families, work, and a wide variety of social institutions.

Jerry A. Jacobs
Guest Editor

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Editorial

Gender, Work and Family in Turbulent Times: Varied Responses to COVID-19 and Future Directions for Research

Jerry A. Jacobs

Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA; jjacobs@sas.upenn.edu

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Special Issue Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted lives and social routines world-wide, with enduring implications that are continuing to unfold. This collection of research articles conveys some of the ways that families adapted to the situations they found themselves in during the COVID-19 period.

In everyday conversations with friends, family, neighbors and professional colleagues, my sense is that most people would like to put the COVID-19 episode behind them. It is curious that in the current run-up to the 2024 election in the US, apparently neither side sees an advantage in mentioning the pandemic experience. Yet just as the COVID-19 virus itself is still evolving, the wide-ranging social impacts of the pandemic are still in process, with long-lasting but still uncertain implications in the areas of work, family, schools, public health and even urban politics. And from a research point of view, there is still much to be learned about this unfolding series of events.

In this introduction, in addition to reviewing the main themes of the collected articles, I endeavor to make three principal points. First, research about the pandemic period remains far from complete, given the scale of the pandemic and range of both policy and individual responses across the US and around the world. While there were many common experiences, the diversity of responses to COVID-19 is just beginning to be understood. Second, the pandemic raises some questions about social experiments in general and "natural experiments" in particular. Finally, the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on gender inequality and for a wide range of other aspects of social life will continue to require further investigation for years to come.

The articles in this Special Issue shed light on families' diverse responses to COVID-19. Some may believe that we already know all there is to know, while others may be tired of the topic and seek to explore other compelling matters. My hope is that these papers will pique the interest of many readers and begin to suggest how much remains to be learned regarding the pandemic period.

COVID-19 disrupted established patterns on a global scale. The pandemic resulted in the loss of some jobs and the large-scale implementation of remote work. The fact that remote work was successful—at least to some degree, at least in the short term—changed workers' preferences. The widespread success of remote and especially hybrid work gave workers the sense that working at home was feasible and that long daily commutes were not set in stone.

Families in different circumstances, in different countries and cultures, responded to these seismic events in diverse ways. While most of the articles in this collection focus on the domestic division of labor, this review begins with three papers that examine employment and careers.

1. COVID-19, Gender, Employment and Careers

Among COVID-19's earliest impacts was a spike in unemployment. The article by Yasmin Merktehikian and Emilio Parrado examines changing labor force participation in Argentina. Unemployment in Argentina increased sharply during the first months of

the pandemic for both men and women due to severe disruptions in the global economic system. In focusing on the gendered pattern of economic decline and recovery, the authors show that men's employment rebounded more quickly. Women's over-representation in public sector employment proved to be more resilient, but their concentration in informal sector employment slowed their rebound. Many women in Argentina are employed in domestic service, a type of employment that was slow to recover, due in part to enduring concerns about the contagion. Merktehikian and Parrado also discuss the limited success of governmental assistance in buffering the impact of COVID-19 on women in the informal sector.

Two papers exemplify the rich complexity of and variations in the COVID-19 experience for one specific line of work, namely, university faculty. Sarah Thébaud, Charlotte Hoppen, Jennifer David and Eileen Boris collected qualitative and quantitative data on the experiences of faculty at one college campus in the US. Their article focuses on the experiences of 181 faculty with child-care responsibilities. Thébaud et al. report that mothers were more likely than fathers to spend more time taking care of their children. They also find that mothers' care time was less predictable and more likely to interrupt their work flow. The consequences for some mothers could be emotionally draining, with some even reporting exhaustion and burnout. The university in question quickly initiated policies designed to assist faculty with caregiving responsibilities, but Thébaud and her colleagues find that these programs did not go far enough. This study collected data in May of 2021, one year into the pandemic. Since the findings reflect the very disruptive end of the spring 2020 semester and the 2020–2021 school year, follow-up research well into the future will be required to fully assess the extent to which this period had enduring effects on academic careers.

Anna Carreri, Manuela Naldini and Alessia Tuselli pursue a complementary analysis of Italian academics. Their article casts a wider net in order to compare academics with children to their counterparts without children and those at different career stages. They find that COVID-19 increased inequality between these groups. Some were able to focus their energies on research while others found their time and attention divided. Those who were not yet established in secure academic posts were particularly impacted, especially those who were obligated to absorb the carework burden during the lockdown period. Carreri et al. apply an intersectional framework to intra-academic differences in ways that differ somewhat from the way that sociologists in the US employ these terms.

2. COVID-19 Responses as Social Experimentation

We can think of the pandemic as a 'natural experiment'—or set of experiments. In other words, rapid, large-scale changes in social organization and behavior were implemented in a very short period of time. But in fact multiple experiments were set in motion simultaneously. In particular, many day-care centers closed and schools moved to remote-learning modes of instruction. The result was a dramatic increase in care and instructional responsibilities for parents of pre-school and school-aged children. In response to the pandemic, firms shifted many jobs from an office setting to remote or hybrid arrangements. An ideal assessment of the impact of the pandemic on working families would seek to separate these two potentially off-setting factors.

Wen Fan and Phyllis Moen pursue just such a strategy. They draw on data from a sizeable multi-wave study in the US that allows them to differentiate between the effects of remote work and school closures. They find that working parents, and especially mothers, experienced a great deal of stress as a result of trying to work from home while child-care centers and schools were closed. As schools reopened, the positive dimensions of working from home became more apparent. I view these results with cautious optimism because remote work is likely to endure for many workers. In other words, while the disruptive experiences of the pandemic were very serious and even caused some working mothers to leave the labor force, the enhanced flexibility that accompanies remote work is likely to be a positive factor, not just for working moms but also for fathers as well as for those without

care-giving responsibilities. At the end of this introduction, I will return to the question of the long-term effects of the pandemic on gender and families.

Chyi-Rong Tsai approaches the notion of a "natural experiment" in a rather different way. She raises questions about whether husbands and wives who were both working from home were really "in the same place." Her small-scale set of interviews with married couples in Taipei suggests that physical space for paid work was not allocated equally. Husbands settled into more private spaces where their time and concentration were more likely to be protected, while wives tended to work in areas that were more public. Mothers were more easily and more frequently interrupted. In this way, dual-earner couples who were both working from home nonetheless confronted different realities. Women were expected to prioritize their domestic duties as wives while men were able to prioritize their identity as workers.

The theme of culturally-specific responses is further developed in the paper on China by Ting Wang. China's policy response to COVID-19 included an enduring lockdown, which greatly limited people's ability to leave their residences. In this context, Wang shows that men often took on the task of grocery shopping but tended to do even less in the way of other household chores—such as cooking, cleaning and laundry—than before the pandemic. The data also point to the persisting division of labor in multi-generational households. Wang suggests that while shopping took on a masculine connotation, the overall power of gender norms to shape the domestic division of labor remained largely unchanged, despite men and women spending most of their time together at home. This study exemplifies the cultural and contextual specificity of responses to the pandemic.

The COVID-19 experience raises questions about what we can learn from experiments. The public policy and organizational responses to the pandemic outbreak can be viewed as a series of natural experiments that were responses to a natural disaster instead of being intentionally initiated by organizations or researchers. What happens when people abruptly begin to work remotely on a massive scale?

A number of pre-pandemic studies explored the effects of remote work on employers and their families (e.g., Monteiro et al. 2019; see also reviews cited by Fan and Moen). The researchers undertaking these studies deserve credit for investigating the possibility of new and more flexible work arrangements before they became widely adopted. However, the findings of these studies need to be reconsidered in light of the COVID-19 experience in at least four main respects. First, the relatively small number of companies willing to adopt remote work arrangements before COVID-19 were self-selected in many ways. In other words, researchers can conduct an experiment, for example, by giving one unit in a company remote work while requiring employees in another unit to work in person. One can compare any observed differences in productivity or job satisfaction that emerge and attribute those to the effect of working remotely. But if only a small number of companies in industries that are well-suited to remote work are in the experimental pool, the generalizability of the findings from these studies remain uncertain. In short, society-wide experiments differ from company-by-company or division-by-division experiments. COVID-19 resulted in experimentation on a society-wide scale. Changing the location of work was not just the prerogative of individual employers seeking to tinker with work routines. Rather, the lockdowns and other, less restrictive rules imposed by governments and often by employers themselves were implemented on a large scale.

Second, many social experiments do not follow the double-blind design typified by randomized drug trials. Those who had to work in-person, on-site knew that their experiences were different from their remote counterparts.

Additionally, workplace experiments such as remote work and four-day workweeks cannot be completely self-contained. Remote workers interface with clients and with co-workers in other divisions and in other firms who have not signed on to be part of the experiment. The widespread access to and success of remote work led workers to resist employers' demands to return to the office. It was not possible to discern this aspect of remote work in the relatively small-scale pre-pandemic experiments.

Carolyn E. Waldrep, Marni Fritz and Jennifer Glass examine whether workers in the US prefer remote work. They make an important distinction that is not always noted in research in this area, namely that not all jobs are well suited to remote arrangements. For example, many elementary-school teachers complained that grade-school education struggled with remote instruction. Waldrep and her colleagues find wide support for maintaining remote work except among those whose jobs were poorly suited to virtual arrangements. With the exception of these groups, respondents reported enhanced job satisfaction and even enhanced productivity. The key to both was the greater control over their schedules and the flexibility afforded by remote work. When employers attempted to impose "back to the office" rules, some employees acquiesced while others changed jobs in order to maintain their preferred and more flexible work arrangements.

Bringing workers back to the office, moreover, was not simply a matter of going back to the status quo ante. Many employers sought to downsize offices to save on office space. In some cases, employees were back in the office on staggered days. Some employers took advantage of their ability to demand staff return to the office while showing more flexibility for higher-status professional workers.

Finally, understanding the long-term effects on both families and firms requires much longer-term time frames than are usual in experimental research designs. Again, the contrast to double-blind clinical trials of new medications is illuminating. In most cases, medications that are intended to address patients' symptoms are expected to produce rapid physiological responses.

The long-term effects of remote work, however, may well differ from the short-term patterns. For example, while in general the productivity of remote work may be acceptable, over the long-term, challenges in on-boarding new workers and socializing them in the firms' culture may loom larger. Similarly, over the short-term employees may savor the flexibility that accompanies remote work, but over the longer term the diminished contact with co-workers may begin to feel problematic if their accumulated social capital and attendant social integration diminishes.

3. The Gender Division of Housework and Family Care

If the demands of caring, especially childcare, increased during the pandemic, did fathers step up to the plate? In other words, a central question for the pandemic experience then is: "Did dads do more?" The question becomes particularly compelling for dual-career couples where both parents worked from home. On the surface, this situation would seem to create the ideal structural conditions for true sharing of household chores and caregiving responsibilities for both parents. In other words, if both parents are working from home, neither is travelling, and both are physically proximate to children, should this not create the structural basis for gender equality in parenting? Under these circumstances, wives' bargaining power should increase: wives can demand that their husbands to do more, and the husbands have no place to go to avoid this pressure. The reality fell far short of this scenario. Several papers in this collection seek to document and explore the reasons for this pattern.

Daniel Carlson, Skye McPherson and Richard Petts examine whether fathers in the US increased their contributions not just to household chores but to parenting. Fathers' contribution did indeed increase in many cases, but it still fell considerably short of gender equality. While many potential factors may contribute to this pattern, Carlson and his colleagues focus on the issue of gender ideology. Their reasoning is that if a particular couple adheres to traditional gender norms, then one might not expect a rapid conversion to a set of gender-egalitarian household arrangements. In other words, fathers in dual-career couples could be expected to be equally engaged in childcare only if they were committed to egalitarian views about gender and family.

The article by Sejin Um, Anne Kou, Carolyn E. Waldrep and Kathleen Gerson addresses a closely related question, namely, the ways couples define and understand the ideal of work–family balance. They report that many respondents conceive of work–family balance as an individual matter, that is, the ability to attend to diverse time demands in a way that

works for them as individuals. In contrast, other respondents take a more family-centered approach, defining balance with reference to the activities of both partners. This second approach can further be divided into two groups. One views balance as the sum of partners' specialized contributions, with women specializing in caregiving and men specializing in breadwinning. The second group aspires to an egalitarian ideal, where partners put in similar amounts of time and effort and share responsibility in both the work and family spheres. The authors suggest that expectations regarding movement toward work–family balance need to be viewed through this conceptual frame, which recognizes that family members' understandings of balance have different meanings in different family contexts.

The notion that gender is fundamental to beliefs that shape behavior is addressed directly in the subtle paper by Michelle Cera, Golda Kaplan, Kathleen Gerson and Barbara Risman. In attempting to answer the question "Why was the movement toward gender equality during the pandemic so limited?", Cera and her colleagues divided families into egalitarian and inegalitarian groups in terms of their pre-COVID-19 and subsequent situations. They report that satisfaction with the gendered division of household labor is higher—for both husbands and wives—in families with an egalitarian division of domestic labor. In terms of change, however, only a small minority of respondents reported success in moving toward more egalitarian arrangements. The largest group reported no strong desire for change, while another sizable group reported attempting but not succeeding in accomplishing change. Yet a small group of couples were able to use the availability of remote work to put their pre-COVID-19 desire for equality into practice. In other words, while expectations regarding change should be tempered for those families who report little or no desire to change existing arrangements, change can occur when institutional arrangements make it possible to implement egalitarian ideals. Cera et al. label this a case of "sticky gender" to suggest that both structural and cultural change will be required in order to achieve significant progress toward gender equality.

4. Other Dimensions of Family Life

Diverse groups experienced the disruptions caused by the pandemic in different ways. While the novel circumstance of married couples who both work remotely has understandably garnered considerable attention, others in different family circumstances faced a very different set of circumstances.

The disruptive effects of the pandemic were especially pronounced for multi-national families, even for those with considerable economic resources. Rianka Roy, Bandana Purkayastha and Elizabeth Chacko examined the experiences of Asian Indian immigrants in the US during the pandemic. They use the term "dispersed care" to refer to the ways that families—even those located on different continents—can knit together systems of family care during routine circumstances and in cases of medical crises. Travel restrictions as well as immigration rules that limit citizenship opportunities wreaked havoc on the ability of widely dispersed families to provide care during the pandemic.

The themes of housework, childcare and other forms of caregiving, workplace flexibility and gender inequality are the threads that connect the set of papers included in this Special Issue. But even with a focus on the family, there are other aspects of social life that warrant attention.

Marni Fritz, Sejin Um and Barbara Risman consider another important aspect of family life, namely, marital quality. The COVID-19 period increased the amount of time that families in the US spent together. Did this lead to increased discord, or did married individuals find new opportunities to enjoy their partner's company? The majority of respondents reported improved marital quality; the second most common response was no change. The relatively small group that experienced a decline in marital quality also reported problems with the increased demands of domestic labor and childcare.

In my view, this result is largely consistent with the notion that many Americans now experience a "time famine" that constrains family time at home and family activities outside the home. It is ironic that the imposition of time together improved this important aspect of family life. Whether these routines persist post-COVID-19 remains to be explored.

5. The coming decades of COVID-19 research

On May 5, the World Health Organization proclaimed that the global COVID-19 pandemic was officially over. While most people will be happy to put the COVID-19 period in the rear-view mirror, there are many reasons for researchers to continue to study this important period and its enduring effects.

Economists and scholars in other fields continue to conduct research on the causes and consequences of the Great Depression nearly a century after the stock market crash of 1929. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to warrant the same kind of enduring attention.

In his important book, *The Children of the Great Depression*, Glen Elder (1974) showed that the Depression had long-term effects on the cohorts who lived through this cataclysmic event, shaping the experiences of these generations for the rest of their lives. Elder's work has spawned subsequent attention to the experiences that shape the life experiences of particular birth cohorts (Gerson 2003).

While the global health emergency may be over for now, in August 2024, the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) declared COVID-19 to be endemic. In other words, milder and hopefully more manageable strains of COVID-19 are likely to have an enduring presence in the human population. Of course, there is always the risk that more virulent strains may develop, or that humanity will face other deadly virus outbreaks. In any event, it is likely that many important facets of social life will continue to reflect the COVID-19 period for years to come. In addition to the durability of hybrid and remote work discussed above and in this SpecialIssue, many other key social trends need to be tracked over time. Many standard social indicators, such as the test scores of students, women's labor force participation, the shortage of healthcare staff, residential and commercial real estate prices, population shifts and so on will need to be tracked to observe post-COVID-19 trends.

Researchers will need to track the durability of hybrid and remote work arrangements and the wide-ranging implications of this important new pattern of work. Commuting to work is one of the least popular segments of the day. Commutes are often long and include some uncertainty that commuters cannot fully control. Traffic accidents may slow the drive; equipment breakdowns may delay the arrival of the bus or train. Many workers celebrate the reduction in or the elimination of their commute to the office. Yet there is another side to this matter. Mass transit systems depend on a stable level of ridership. Sharp reductions in the number of riders destabilize budgets. In the worst-case scenario, reduced ridership leads to cuts in service, which in turn further reduces ridership.

Similarly, the value of commercial real estate in central business districts has declined—sometimes sharply—as many cubicle-filled offices sit empty. Efforts to convert these structures into much-needed residential living spaces are underway, but this task is proving to be difficult and expensive, as many buildings are not well suited to this type of conversion.

Retail stores and lunch counters are among the many establishments located in central business districts that depend on extensive foot traffic. Cities depend on active business centers, and thus it is not surprising that mayors have become among the leading advocates of employees' return to the office. In short, the impact of hybrid and remote work arrangements is continuing to unfold.

Future policy makers will draw on the pandemic experience in order to develop approaches to controlling the spread of disease outbreaks in ways that minimize social and economic disruption and are considered acceptable to the affected populations. But since no two situations will be identical, we need to be careful about how we apply the insights gleaned from these experiments to future situations. Future pandemics will differ in the severity of the illnesses, in the transmission rates and in the speed at which medications and vaccines may become available. To be sure, responses to future pandemics will need to be based on the best available evidence, but it will take wise leadership to draw the right inferences from messy and incomplete data as applied to unique and incompletely understood situations. Epidemiologists and virologists will continue to be busy. New ways of monitoring outbreaks will be deployed and the race to develop vaccines to keep up with the evolution of new strains of viruses will be an ongoing challenge.

The central theme of the papers in this collection is gender equality, particularly in terms of domestic arrangements and in the labor force. While initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic presented great challenges to working parents and working mothers in particular, future trends remain harder to predict, as changes to date hold both promise and peril for women's opportunities. More careful and detailed studies of diverse population groups, in particular family situations and unique occupations, will help to fill in the missing pieces of the COVID-19 puzzle, and future studies will help us to track its long-term consequences.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

Preferences for Remote and Hybrid Work: Evidence from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Carolyn E. Waldrep [1,*,†], Marni Fritz [2,†] and Jennifer Glass [1]

[1] Department of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78723, USA; jennifer-glass@utexas.edu
[2] Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL 60607, USA; mfritz6@uic.edu
* Correspondence: kerry.waldrep@utexas.edu
† These authors contributed equally to this work.

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for many American workers to work from home. Did the rapid and widespread adoption of remote work arrangements influence workers' preferences? This study analyzes the early pandemic work experiences of 52 participants (20 men and 32 women) in dual-earner households with children through in-depth interviews conducted in 2021 and 2022 via Zoom. The study explores respondents' desire for remote and hybrid work, considering job satisfaction as well as job characteristics, family structure, and household organization. Unless their jobs were poorly suited to remote work, most workers with pandemic-era remote work opportunities—and even some who had not worked remotely—wished to keep remote access in their post-pandemic work arrangements. Respondents reported enhanced job satisfaction and productivity from remote work, as a result of greater schedule control and flexibility. We found that some workers were willing to change jobs to maintain their preferred work arrangement, while others acquiesced to employers' return-to-work policies. The study highlights the need to understand workers' preferences in supporting flexible work arrangements and contributes to the understanding of remote work on family dynamics during the pandemic and afterwards.

Keywords: remote work; work from home; job satisfaction; desire to work remotely; productivity; flexibility; commute; childcare; household organization; pandemic

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created a new opportunity for remote work among American office and professional workers. In an effort to limit the contagious virus, workers remained at home whenever possible, and many learned to connect to their workplaces remotely through telecommunications technology. Americans began working remotely in large numbers in the spring of 2020, connecting from home offices, bedrooms, kitchens, and closets, managing their work responsibilities as well as they could, adjusting to a "new normal", and handling computer-facilitated meetings with cameras, unstable wifi, and reminders to unmute. But even with challenges, many remote workers were able to succeed and even thrive during the pandemic (Barrero et al. 2021; Fulford 2023).

Given that a large swath of workers transitioned to remote work overnight, this study asks how newly remote workers experienced this new mode of working. What workplace arrangements did workers wish to maintain going forward as the pandemic waned? Under what circumstances did workers tolerate remote work as situationally necessary, and when did workers wish to keep remote access in their workplace arrangements post-pandemic? Finally, how can this unique moment in time help clarify potential shifts in US work culture more broadly? We are interested in understanding workers' pandemic-era work experiences in their own words, to explore the specific conditions under which individuals preferred remote or hybrid work arrangements compared to full-time in-person, as they transitioned out of the pandemic, and whether they were willing to change jobs to maintain their workplace preferences.

1.1. Motivation

Despite workers' embrace of remote work during the pandemic, many managers preferred that workers return in-person after the threats to public health waned (Mann 2023; Owusu 2023; Parker et al. 2020). Focused on output during traditional work hours, they perceived that remote work reduced productivity and created issues of coordination and control, even if employees considered the elimination of commuting time as a boost to productivity (Bernstein et al. 2020; Bloom et al. 2023). As companies began mandating returns to the office, workers weighed the benefits of remote work against traditional office culture (Bremen 2023; Casselman 2023). In the tech industry, for example, as the pandemic waned, giants like Google and Meta directed workers in 2023 to return to their offices and monitored attendance, even though smaller tech firms experienced an increase in departures when requiring a return from remote work (Mann 2023). In the post-pandemic era, will remote work, a hallmark of pandemic work arrangements, be sustainable (Bloom 2021; Casselman 2023; Owusu 2023), either full-time or in a hybrid arrangement with some remote work and some work on site?

Existing scholarship has tracked pandemic-era work arrangements through quantitative and mixed-methods work (see, among others, Collins et al. 2021; Fan and Moen 2022; Matthews et al. 2021). Here we offer a detailed understanding from in-depth interviews of remote working parents in the pandemic on the practical and emotional factors motivating their choices to stay remote or return to the office post-pandemic.

1.2. Background

The unprecedented shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic blurred work-life boundaries. Recent studies highlight the impact of remote work arrangements and the role of organizational and individual strategies in shaping these experiences (Barrero et al. 2021; Bernstein et al. 2020; Brynjolfsson et al. 2020; Dingel and Neiman 2020). Remote work was relatively uncommon before the pandemic: Barrero et al. (2021) estimate that remote work accounted for just five percent of paid work hours before the pandemic, compared to about 50 percent between April and December 2020. By April 2020, 35.2% of employed American workers who had been working on site began working remotely from home (Brynjolfsson et al. 2020). Not all jobs can be performed remotely, and remote work is more common for workers with higher education and salary (Barrero et al. 2021; Bernstein et al. 2020; Brynjolfsson et al. 2020; Dingel and Neiman 2020).

Scholars suggested before the onset of the pandemic that remote work could increase worker productivity (Allen et al. 2015; Bloom et al. 2015; Gajendran and Harrison 2007; Gajendran et al. 2015; Noonan and Glass 2012), and studies during the pandemic also found that remote workers were more productive (Barrero et al. 2021; Ozimek 2020). When workers received sufficient support, working from home during the pandemic enhanced well-being and productivity, especially for women and people of color (Fan and Moen 2023). However, some scholars found no change in perceptions of productivity in the shift to remote work (Awada et al. 2021), and one-third of remote managers in one study reported seeing a decrease in their workers' productivity, while one-third did not discern any change and the final third reported more productivity (Parker et al. 2020). Similarly, Italian scholars found that remote workers with autonomy in their jobs and leadership skills increased their productivity, while those remote workers who faced increased social isolation and work-family-conflict decreased their productivity (Galanti et al. 2021).

Even if many remote work arrangements offered an opportunity to increase productivity, some workers—mothers in particular—faced family responsibilities that limited their productivity during the pandemic (Yavorsky et al. 2021). The pandemic simultaneously exacerbated existing gender disparities at work and at home, potentially influencing who desired to continue working remotely instead of returning to the office, especially for women juggling increased caregiving demands (Carlson et al. 2022; Fan and Moen 2022; Lyttelton et al. 2023; Yavorsky et al. 2021). Mothers of young children often stopped working when full-time childcare closed, though fathers' involvement could sometimes

buffer that impact (Petts et al. 2021). For those who continued working, scholars identified similar trends: involved men reduced the burden that otherwise fell on mothers (Calarco et al. 2021; Carlson et al. 2022; Lyttelton et al. 2023). How much these pressures reduced mothers' desire for remote work remains largely unknown.

1.3. The Current Paper

Scholars have argued that remote work will continue in some form (Dua et al. 2022; Ozimek 2020), whether that is fully remote or in a hybrid model, and we contribute to this literature by shedding light on workers' experiences and preferences during the pandemic, in order to frame their goals, expectations, and preferences for the future. We expect that most workers will prefer remote work arrangements (Kossek et al. 2021; Neeley 2020), especially hybrid work models that leverage the flexibility of remote work while retaining the advantages of on-site collaboration (Kagerl and Starzetz 2023; Smite et al. 2023). It is equally important to analyze patterns when remote workers preferred to return to on-site roles, and we theorize that these preferences may occur in three distinct ways: first, some individuals may work in jobs that were poorly suited to remote work. Others whose jobs are well-suited to remote arrangements may nonetheless prefer to work on site—they may be soured to remote work altogether after struggling through pandemic-specific challenges, or they may prefer to work near colleagues or to separate their workplace from their home. Because workers' scheduling preferences will remain increasingly important for hiring and retention, we explore the various factors that drive desires to work remotely, including pandemic experiences with technology, space, and time challenges, as well as their preferred schedule moving forward.

2. Materials and Methods

The data for this study come from in-depth interviews conducted between June 2021 and February 2022 with caregivers who have at least one child aged 18 or younger. Our sample began with a nationally represented online panel used for the National Opinion Research Corporation's AmeriSpeak survey in the fall and winter of 2021, where those with caregiving responsibility (children or elders) were asked whether they would be willing to have a Zoom or phone interview about their experiences during the pandemic. Approximately twenty percent of those eligible responded, giving us well over one hundred interviews; we augmented those with respondent-driven snowball sampling to acquire additional interviews from respondents' referrals, for a total of 127 interviews in our larger sample.

Of the total sample, this paper analyzes 52—20 men and 32 women—who were (1) partnered within a dual-earner couple, and (2) had at least one child in the home aged 18 or under. This subset represents a demographic that faced unique challenges during the pandemic: balancing work and childcare responsibilities while navigating the dynamics of a dual-earner household. We focus on partnered respondents, though our research design limited interviews to only one partner in a couple. Despite efforts to include a diverse range of family structures, we were unable to recruit sufficient non-heterosexual, dual-earner, parenting couples, or couples engaging only in eldercare, to allow for meaningful analysis, so this study predominantly focuses on heterosexual couples caregiving to their children. Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of our respondents.

Our research benefits from the timing of our interviews during the period when many were navigating the return to office work after the pandemic. Thanks to this timing, we captured real-time reactions and evolving workplace dynamics to bring forth a multi-dimensional narrative in the respondents' varied remote work experiences. While this variation limited our ability to harmonize the remote work narrative at a single moment in time, our approach to timing strengthened our research by providing a spectrum of experiences at different stages of transitioning out of mandated remote work. Figure 1 shows the duration of time in which our respondents worked remotely during the pandemic: those who had returned to work within a year could indicate how long their job offered a remote

work arrangement, while those who remained working remotely, permanently, or whose jobs had not developed a post-pandemic return plan continued working from home.

Table 1. Description of respondents by gender in our sample of dual-earner couples.

	Women	**Men**	**Total**
Racial and ethnic groups			
White	21 (66%)	14 (70%)	35 (67%)
Hispanic-origin	4 (12%)	3 (15%)	7 (13%)
Black	5 (16%)	1 (5%)	6 (12%)
Other racial or ethnic group	2 (6%)	2 (10%)	4 (8%)
Age range			
20–29	1 (3%)	1 (5%)	2 (4%)
30–39	19 (59%)	6 (30%)	25 (48%)
40–49	8 (25%)	12 (60%)	20 (38%)
50 or older	4 (13%)	1 (5%)	5 (10%)
Marital status			
Married	30 (94%)	19 (95%)	49 (94%)
Cohabiting	2 (6%)	1 (5%)	3 (6%)
Number of children in home			
1 child	9 (28%)	7 (35%)	16 (31%)
2 children	15 (47%)	11 (55%)	26 (50%)
3 or more children	8 (25%)	2 (10%)	10 (19%)
Age range of children			
All children younger than 6	11 (34%)	7 (35%)	18 (35%)
All children aged 6 or older	11 (34%)	12 (60%)	23 (44%)
Children of varied ages	10 (32%)	1 (5%)	11 (21%)
Educational status			
Less than a college degree	9 (28%)	7 (35%)	16 (30%)
College degree	11 (34%)	7 (35%)	18 (35%)
Graduate degree	12 (38%)	6 (30%)	18 (35%)
Income range, annually			
Less than USD 100,000	15 (47%)	5 (25%)	20 (38%)
USD 100,000–150,000	6 (19%)	8 (40%)	14 (27%)
More than USD 150,000	11 (34%)	6 (30%)	17 (33%)
Refused to disclose	-	1 (5%)	1 (2%)
Total	32 (62%)	20 (38%)	52 (100%)

Interviews were conducted over Zoom and ranged from forty minutes to over two hours, averaging about ninety minutes each. The interview protocol was designed to foster replicability in future research endeavors. The guide underwent a pilot testing phase to refine the questions and create probes to elicit detailed responses. Interviewers asked respondents to detail their current employment arrangement, their employment arrangement in the months before the pandemic, and any transition of work arrangements during the pandemic. Specifically, these questions addressed where, how, and when they completed their work responsibilities, how they felt about their job, to what extent they felt support from employers and co-workers, and how they prefer and expect to work in the future. We asked similar questions about the respondents' partners' jobs, as well as how the respondents managed the combination of their work responsibilities with their responsibilities at home.

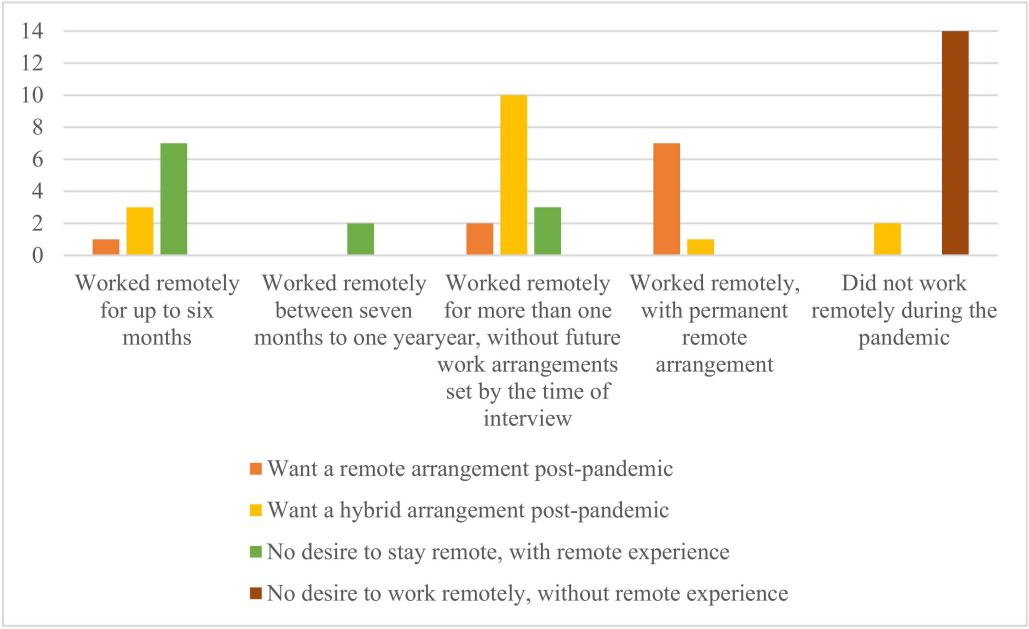

Figure 1. Respondents' duration of remote work in the pandemic and desired future arrangements.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with pseudonyms used and identifying information changed. The researchers coded the interviews using Atlas.ti, a software program for qualitative data analysis. In analyzing the qualitative data derived from the interviews, we employed a flexible coding strategy as conceptualized by Deterding and Waters (2021), where we developed our analysis based on coding on certain themes (including workplace arrangements before, during, and after the pandemic; job roles and productivity; and any benefits, challenges, and satisfaction with workplace arrangements). This approach allowed for an adaptive and iterative process where the coding scheme evolved in tandem with a deepening understanding of the data. Initial codes on workplace arrangements within a couple and sources of satisfaction or dissatisfaction were revisited, and as necessary, revised, merged, or split to better encapsulate emerging patterns and themes. We identified scope conditions within workplace arrangements based on satisfaction and desire to continue through the respondents' household experiences during the pandemic. This dynamic process facilitated a rich and nuanced exploration of the interview narratives, encouraging an openness to unexpected themes and a readiness to refine the coding structure in response to the data's intrinsic patterns and nuances (Deterding and Waters 2021). The quotations excerpted below are from the in-depth interviews and were edited for clarity.

3. Results

3.1. Respondents' Reactions to Experiences of Remote Work

Most respondents who worked from home during the pandemic expressed satisfaction with remote work and indicated a desire to continue. One such respondent was Robert, a 39-year-old Black father of two preschool-aged children. Even though he recognized the benefits of in-person teamwork and collaboration in his finance firm, he preferred to work remotely:

> I love it, I never want to have to go in. [In the office] I like the camaraderie and the team building and the opportunities that we have to . . . solve these problems [together], . . . but . . . now that I've had this new sense of reality, I wouldn't change it if I had the option. . . . I know it's not going to be that way long term, at some point there will be a return to the office, but if I had my way, I would not change the current work situation. It's nice, and it's comfortable.

Likewise, Renee, a 35-year-old white mother of two, reflected on her experience working from home as a university administrator:

> I feel like the pandemic really just showed . . . that there are a lot of opportunities where . . . it benefits [people] to work from home. You can get as much or more out of your employees. It's not just flexible for parents, but if you have to take care of any type of family member, doctor's appointments, maybe your own personal health, there's just so many reasons why this remote work could be super beneficial for many employees across a variety of industries.

But whereas Robert was resigned that his access to remote work would end against his preferences, Renee valued her ability to work from home so highly that when her university returned in person to campus, she changed jobs to a remote position outside of academia.

A few respondents, however, had strong negative reactions to remote work. While some had idiosyncratic reasons, most objected when their jobs were ill-suited to remote work. Even though these respondents *did* conduct their work from home, they explained that their jobs were poorly suited to be performed remotely. For example, Anna, a 47-year-old white fifth-grade teacher and mother of two, described how the personal connection essential to teaching was missing when her class was remote: "That was hard to . . . get them to do work. . . . At school, you can sit by them, and they're going to start working at some point. It was just harder to motivate kids". Remote access prevented Anna from engaging in her work meaningfully, and she expressed relief in returning to her classroom.

> It was good to go back. It's just so much easier to teach your lessons, you have everything you need there. It just feels like it should feel. And at home, it worked fine, but it's a lot harder to teach a math concept and then kind of look on their screens [at] what they're doing, but you can't see it like you can at school. It was good to be back.

Anna, and respondents like her, expressed that the difficulty with remote work came from the nature of their jobs, not personal preferences about working from home. Some jobs require a physical presence in a workplace and cannot be conducted from home; the job tasks and responsibilities in other positions involving direct transfer of skills between humans, like Anna's, can only be nominally conducted remotely; in practice, the nature of the work requires them to be in person with others to achieve their tasks completely. Like those jobs that require a physical presence in a certain workplace, these jobs require a physical presence *with other people* and lose capability when performed remotely.

To evaluate workers' experiences, we considered their desire to continue remotely after the pandemic. Table 2 focuses on those who had remote work experience during the pandemic. Those who worked from home during the pandemic expressed a range of desires for future work arrangements: some wished to stay in a fully remote position permanently, others looked for a hybrid arrangement to capture the best of both approaches, and a vocal minority celebrated their return to in-person work, with no desire to work remotely[1] (see Note). We identify scope conditions of each of these three desires, as well as patterns in job and family attributes. Finally, we consider the extent to which respondents were willing to change jobs to achieve their desired work arrangement.

We found that workers overall valued working from home during the pandemic. The flexibility of remote work allowed for greater productivity and job satisfaction, enabling parents to coordinate with their children's schedules, and encouraging workers to continue working from home in the future, at least in a hybrid format. Respondents also enjoyed the lack of commute and freedom from disruptions and surveillance. However, respondents faced challenges that hindered their satisfaction with remote work, some specific to the pandemic—like complications managing childcare or household responsibilities—and others that will remain part of remote work—such as a lack of social contact with coworkers. Although many workers faced negative life changes during the pandemic, on the whole, respondents supported continuing to work from home, at least for some of their work

hours. Here we analyzed which individual and family characteristics influenced workers' desire to continue remote work arrangements.

Table 2. Description of respondents in our sample with remote work experience by preferred job arrangement after the pandemic.

	Remote	Hybrid	No Desire for Remote Access	Total
Gender				
Women	6 (26%)	8 (35%)	9 (39%)	23 (68%)
Men	4 (36%)	4 (36%)	3 (27%)	11 (32%)
Weekly Hours Worked				
Between 20 and 34 h	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	4 (12%)
Between 35 and 44 h	6 (26%)	10 (43%)	7 (30%)	23 (68%)
At least 45 h	2 (29%)	1 (14%)	4 (57%)	7 (20%)
Duration of Remote Work				
Not more than 6 months	1 (10%)	2 (20%)	7 (70%)	10 (29%)
6 months to 1 year	-	-	2 (100%)	2 (6%)
More than 1 year	2 (14%)	9 (64%)	3 (21%)	14 (41%)
Permanent remote work	7 (88%)	1 (12%)	-	8 (24%)
Household Work Arrangement				
Both partners remote	9 (45%)	8 (40%)	3 (15%)	20 (59%)
As the only remote worker	1 (7%)	4 (29%)	9 (64%)	14 (41%)
Number of children in home				
1 child	1 (10%)	5 (50%)	4 (40%)	10 (29%)
2 children	8 (44%)	4 (22%)	6 (33%)	18 (53%)
3 or more children	1 (17%)	3 (50%)	2 (33%)	6 (18%)
Age range of children				
All children younger than 6	3 (27%)	5 (45%)	3 (27%)	11 (32%)
All children aged 6 or older	6 (40%)	3 (20%)	6 (40%)	15 (44%)
Children of varied ages	1 (13%)	4 (50%)	3 (37%)	8 (24%)
Educational status				
Less than a college degree	3 (33%)	3 (33%)	3 (33%)	9 (26%)
College degree	5 (50%)	1 (10%)	4 (40%)	10 (29%)
Graduate degree	2 (13%)	8 (53%)	5 (33%)	15 (44%)
Income range, annually				
Less than USD 100,000	3 (27%)	2 (18%)	6 (55%)	11 (32%)
USD 100,000–150,000	1 (13%)	3 (37%)	4 (50%)	8 (24%)
More than USD 150,000	5 (36%)	7 (50%)	2 (14%)	14 (41%)
Refused to disclose	1			1 (3%)
Total	10 (29%)	12 (35%)	12 (35%)	34 (100%)

3.2. Desire to Continue Working Remotely

In our sample, 33 respondents (22 women and 11 men) worked from home during the pandemic, and 28 respondents described the experiences of their partners (14 women and 14 men) working from home. Over two-thirds of the respondents in our sample who worked remotely during the pandemic wanted to continue working remotely in some form after the pandemic, with 10 preferring all remote work and 12 preferring a hybrid model of work. An additional four respondents who did not work from home during the pandemic indicated a desire to try a job with that arrangement in the future.

3.2.1. Productivity and Reclaiming Time

Respondents who wanted to continue working remotely often reported feeling more productive at home, attributing their efficiency to the lack of interruptions, increased control over their work schedule, and more time to work that had previously been spent

in a commute. This includes respondents like Robert, who preferred to continue working remotely even as he acknowledged the benefits of in-person collaboration. Less often, respondents said their productivity was unchanged, while fewer still found productivity challenging without in-person interactions and the addition of domestic labor.

Shirley, a 52-year-old white mother of two teenagers, reported that she became more productive during the pandemic. As a paralegal, she increased her work hours from forty before the pandemic to as many as sixty hours a week from home because of the focus she gained working remotely. "At home, it's easy", she explained. "You wake up at 7 AM, it's easy to log on and just start working, so I work longer hours . . . now that I'm home". Her productivity also rose because she had fewer interruptions. "Because I could focus . . . here, I didn't have distractions, . . . I started doing a lot of deeper dives into a lot of different issues". Shirley's supervisors recognized her extra work, despite not working onsite with them, and she was awarded additional responsibilities. As she explained proudly, "My bosses found out about that, and . . . all of a sudden I'm on a committee".

The flexibility of working from home was key for Alice, a 37-year-old Black mother of four who worked long hours as a director in a governmental agency. Her agency allowed workers to indicate times when they would be accessible remotely. "You just let your direct supervisor know, 'I'm going to be unavailable from this time to this time, but I'm working up until this time,'" she explained. "No approval is necessary, you just let them know". Although her agency had not yet returned to in-person work at the time of her interview, Alice had enjoyed working from home long enough to know that she wanted to continue, at least some days each week, in the future.

Joe, a 44-year-old white father of a teenager, also enjoyed newfound flexibility and focus while working from home. He provided IT support remotely for the Navy while his partner worked in person as a part-time massage therapist. He reported greater productivity from the quiet at home, and he appreciated how the flexibility let him be more present in his family's life while also working more:

> I love it. My concentration is better. I'm not interrupted constantly during my day, and [I love] the flexibility. I can take my daughter to practice, take her to school, pick her up, and then come back and continue to work until I meet my work obligation. . . I can concentrate more. . . I think I work slightly more. But that's just because that's my choice, you know?

The flexibility of telework offered opportunities for men like Joe to increase their engagement with childcare while maintaining their work responsibilities.

Remote work also offered relief from the sense of surveillance at work. Miranda, a 42-year-old white architect and mother of two teenagers, appreciated working from home, free from the pre-pandemic "office environment [where] you're constantly under supervision, and everyone's watching what you're doing". From home, she lost the tension of surveillance she felt in her office, yet she maintained enough contact with colleagues to complete her work. She explained, "I just have a lot more freedom. . . .I'd just rather be by myself. I'm more productive, everything's quiet, nobody's bothering me, and if I need someone, I just call them". Shirley felt a different kind of surveillance removed when remote work became standard: her company had allowed remote work one day a week before the pandemic, but she found that difficult, feeling constantly mistrusted when working from home. She feared that her supervisors and coworkers would doubt her diligence: "They might think that I'm not at my desk, or if they called and I was in the bathroom or something, are they going to think that I'm not working?" The global opportunity of working from home led her to feel assured that her employers would trust her to work diligently from home, creating an avenue for remote work in the future without concern.

> So, when we all went home in March, it was a lot easier. I didn't have that anxiety because I was like, "Everybody's in the same position, everybody's home". And since we started going back, I don't have that anxiety anymore. . . . I don't feel like they're judging me, saying "Oh well, she's not working", because we just

> went through two years of proving that everybody could work from home. I don't have that anxiety anymore, which is nice.

Respondents felt more satisfied with their jobs when they no longer spent long periods of time commuting to get there. Remote workers could reclaim the minutes—and sometimes hours—that they previously spent commuting, gaining more control over their time and more opportunities to work, relax, and spend with their families. Tommy, a 39-year-old white father of one, loved working from home as an IT support specialist because the elimination of his commute allowed him to spend more quality time with his family. His newfound appreciation for work-life balance and family time influenced his desire to continue working from home post-pandemic, allowing him to keep focus on family time. He explained:

> The telework has made me actually realize a lot about what's most important . . . Not having my commute got me back an hour and a half out of my day. [That's] an hour and a half I get to spend with my kid.

In the same way, the lack of commute benefitted John, a white 63-year-old insurance salesman with one teenager still at home. He found that he was more efficient in connecting with clients when working from home. Describing two clients located a 50-min drive apart, he explained: "I was able to do them back-to-back in the same day, rather than trying to drive between appointments. So that's a real thing, there are some pluses that came from the whole lockdown". Shirley was also grateful to avoid driving her 2.5 commute to work:

> I relished not having a commute. I relished getting out of bed . . . and logging on at seven o'clock instead of getting in my car and driving for an hour and 15 min. So right away at seven, I'm on my computer.

She used her morning commute time to start working earlier and her evening commute to start household chores, getting ahead of the schedules she followed before the pandemic. Shirley's increased productivity, at home and at work, reduced her stress and led to an increase in job satisfaction. As proud as she was of her professional accomplishments during the pandemic, she was more pleased to avoid her commute: "That was the biggest positive for me, to gain two and a half hours to my day every day". She emphasized several times how much better her job felt without the commute. As the pandemic reshaped the daily routines of many workers, the elimination of commute time emerged to benefit respondents at home by fostering productivity and a deeper appreciation for work-life balance.

3.2.2. Work-Life Balance and Flexibility

When schools and childcare facilities closed during the pandemic, children returned to their family's care, leaving parents responsible for work and childcare simultaneously. Gendered expectations of caregiving made remote work during this time without external childcare particularly challenging for mothers, especially with younger children—even when the mothers maintained productivity at work and had support from their partners. The flexibility of remote work gave them the tools and control to "do it all", combining work and family responsibilities, but it was not easy or preferable. For instance, Dawn, a 36-year-old Latina mother of three children and mid-level manager, experienced increased productivity at work, but she found combining childcare and work while schools were closed to be quite difficult:

> . . . then they want a snack and then they want this and I'm trying to juggle my meetings around their schedule and school breaks. And then our [son] was one at the time, crying non-stop. So, I'm handling a crying one-year-old during meetings, taking turns with my husband. . . That really made it tough on us. We were excited for the school reopening.

Because Dawn recognized that her childcare challenges arose from the pandemic's complications, not from working from home, she still hoped to work remotely in some capacity after the pandemic. Likewise, 44-year-old Iris, a white hospital administrator

with one young child, found so much greater job satisfaction in remote work that she transitioned during the pandemic from a less flexible healthcare management job to a fully remote one. She appreciated her current job's support for her preschool-aged child's care needs:

> There's the flexibility that was lacking in the other [job]. So, for instance, you know, if Mandy needs my attention in the morning, that's fine. I can pick up those hours and do work at the end of the day, instead of during that time.

Consistent with the literature, we found that some fathers took on more childcare when families adapted to new workplace arrangements. Joanna, a 35-year-old white analyst whose husband worked from home even before the pandemic, transitioned to remote work just as their young daughter's daycare facilities closed. Joanna explained that her husband's reduced schedule and remote work flexibility allowed him to take over more of the temporarily-increased childcare tasks while they both worked from home:

> My husband, because he was working fewer hours and his work was less demanding, he pretty much took care of Grace. We would take turns if . . . he had a call. My hours are really flexible, as long as I would get my 40 [hours] in, it was fine, so . . . we just kind of made it work.

Moreover, since both parents were home, Joanna explained how they could work together to cover childcare. "Grace was home, and David would primarily take care of her, but I would help out as well, so I would shuffle my hours a little bit to be able to spend more time with her and help her". Another father spending more time in childcare was Joe, the Navy IT support provider. "I love it", he said of remote work, emphasizing the flexibility this workplace arrangement afforded him:

> They made it easy because they said as long as you work your eight hours you could either start in the morning, drop off to do whatever, and then come back in the afternoon. So, they made flexible work schedules for us because some of us being home, a lot of our kids were not in school either. So, there's a lot of helping them with schoolwork and, and those types of things.

He hoped to maintain a hybrid schedule in which he would not have to work in person more than one day a week, even after schools reopen. Even with complicated childcare arrangements, respondents emphasized repeatedly that they wanted to continue working remotely because they could be more productive, as workers and parents, thanks to the flexibility in remote positions.

Planning for the post-pandemic period, respondents understood the flexibility inherent in remote work would allow them to adapt their work schedule around their children's schedules. Holly, a 30-year-old admissions counselor with two young children, discussed how traditional working hours and inflexible office environments often disadvantaged women, but working from home offered her the flexibility to balance her career aspirations with her family responsibilities.

> We use our time more flexibly, not constrained by the office schedule or commutes. I can work out, hang with the kids, stop work, pick them up at four, go to a park; options not available before. I appreciate the flexibility. . .we determine our priorities.

Working from home allowed Miranda to gain childcare flexibility, avoid constant supervision in an office setting, and enjoy a quieter, more productive work environment. When she began working from home, she felt her efficiency increased and enjoyed the flexibility of working from home so much that she increased her work hours from part-time to full-time. With a strong belief in work-life balance and equal parenting, she enjoyed being more present for her children's activities and found telework beneficial, not just for her but for society's reassessment of traditional work norms:

> I've been working part time and kept out of a bigger career due to commuting and [outdated ideas about] rigid hours from the 1950s . . . Our jobs don't reflect

> the desire for [gender] equality. It doesn't work to have parents working till five or six PM, when school is out at three.

Similarly, working remotely—with the flexibility for family and workplace independence it afforded—led to a remarkable improvement in job satisfaction for Renee.

> I work 100% remote 40 h a week. My direct supervisor said, "I don't care what hours you work, as long as you meet your deadlines and get on most meetings". So, I'm able to get my child on the bus, off the bus, . . . As long as I'm meeting my deadlines and getting my projects done, it's very much autonomy and trust that you are an adult, and you can manage yourself and you can complete your tasks. So that has been amazing for my mental and emotional life, with this shift.

Even if only one partner in a household worked remotely, the flexibility in that arrangement benefitted the partner working in-person as well: having at least one remote worker allowed families to use that flexibility for emergency childcare support after schools reopened. Jack, a white 44-year-old father of two and essential worker at a coal power plant, appreciated the flexibility in his wife Tracey's remote arrangement since he no longer had to use valuable (and limited) vacation days to deal with child care issues:

> Before the pandemic, I would usually take vacation—or sometimes she would, depending on who had more vacation. Now after the pandemic, she can just work from home. Neither one of us needs to take vacation if daycare is not available—a lot of time she worked from home and she can still manage the kids, so it works great.

These narratives underscore how remote work offered a new opportunity for workers to manage time with their families. The pandemic challenged parents to navigate the lack of childcare alongside professional responsibilities, yet remote access offered workers the autonomy to define their work hours, the opportunity for fathers to engage more deeply in childcare, and the elimination of rigid office hours, during the pandemic and thereafter, that often clashed with children's schedules. Individuals like Holly, Miranda, and Renee emphasized the empowerment and satisfaction derived from being able to intertwine their career aspirations with family commitments.

3.2.3. Hybrid

The respondents in our sample who expressed a desire to continue working remotely varied significantly in the schedule of remote work they envisioned for the future. Ten respondents (and eight partners) hoped to stay fully remote after the pandemic, though three of those respondents and six of the partners had worked from home before the pandemic as well. More often, respondents preferred a hybrid arrangement: 17 respondents (and 12 partners) hoped to combine the flexibility and autonomy of remote work with periodic in-person engagements to foster team synergy and maintain social connections. Joanna, for instance, enjoyed the freedom of working from home, remained productive, and collaborated well online. She weighed the pros and cons of returning to her office, settling on a hybrid work structure:

> I think a day or two a week would be really nice to just work from home and be able to focus without any kind of the office distractions. I think I would be more productive. But then in other senses I would miss out on some of the important conversations that happen . . ., but I think it would be a good trade, at least a day or two a week or something.

Ethan, a 33-year-old software engineer with two young children, also favored a hybrid arrangement. He felt less connected to his coworkers while working from home:

> I feel like communication is more difficult in general with my coworkers. And because I don't talk to them randomly as much, if I don't schedule a meeting for something in particular, I don't learn about something, so I just feel like I have less context for what my coworkers are working on in general.

While he was still working from home full time at the time of the interview, he anticipated a hybrid work schedule in the future: "My company is going to start having hybrid work for most people. Three days a week everyone's expected to be in the office, and two days you can choose to be remote". Ethan planned to work from home a few days a week in the future to get more family time, especially from eliminating his daily commute:

> I think I will probably take those two days remote, because I will still get to see my coworkers randomly like I used to in the office during the three days, but during the two days I'm remote, I can help with the kids getting to school and stuff.

Some respondents preferred a less frequent hybrid arrangement. Courtney, a 55-year-old white mother of five who worked in energy efficiency, appreciated the convenience and schedule control of remote work but valued social interactions with her colleagues enough to seek occasional office visits. Thinking through future plans, she explained, "I don't anticipate going in... I'd still go in a couple times a month. But that's it". Likewise, Tommy, the IT support specialist, stated: "I would like to be able to go in and do ... in-person training in a big room with everyone where I can see them and help them figure out the stuff. But that's about the only thing I miss from in person".

Respondents seek hybrid schedules to retain control over their schedules while still benefiting from the spontaneous interactions and team synergy fostered in a physical workspace. While respondents vary in the number of onsite days they want in a hybrid model, based on personal and professional needs, they redefined their workplace arrangements from in-person or wholly remote to include hybrid.

3.3. On-Site Preference

We found that 12 workers in our sample—nine women and three men—worked from home during the pandemic but had no interest in continuing to do so. All but one worked full time. Seven respondents (and two respondents' partners) worked from home in jobs that were poorly suited to remote work, while an additional five respondents (and three partners) worked remotely during the pandemic but did not wish to continue for a variety of other reasons. We consider first those whose jobs were ill-suited to remote work. Unlike the variation in those who preferred to work on site, these workers all had college or graduate degrees and returned in person—or quit —within six months of the start of the pandemic.

3.3.1. Structural Challenges to Remote Work

Workers in jobs that were poorly suited to remote work—and their families—faced a much more difficult pandemic experience than both those whose jobs adapted well to remote work and those who continued to work in-person. Structural challenges in the nature of certain professions impacted the job's adaptability to remote work. A job is not well suited for remote work when (1) it involves the transfer of skills between individuals, like teaching or physical therapy, and (2) the transfer cannot occur fully despite the availability of technological communication with clients or students. Unlike other jobs that require a physical in-person component (like a surgeon or a tow truck operator), these roles could be nominally conducted remotely in emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic. These positions ended up being less effective through technology, even when workers expended additional time and effort adapting them. As a result, workers with these jobs experienced stressful, demanding, often overwhelming work responsibilities during the pandemic because they had to complete their work tasks through inadequate technological arrangements when working from home, spending time on work tasks as well as on learning and maneuvering new technological adaptations and approaches.

Respondents facing structural challenges with remote work looked forward to returning to work in person or celebrated when they had returned. Of the respondents and partners working from home in roles poorly suited to remote work, five of the seven respondents, and both partners, returned to work within six months of the start of the

pandemic. While they worked from home because of the pandemic, they stopped trying to maneuver their jobs from home once they could be conducted safely in person. The other two respondents also stopped working from home in jobs that were not compatible with remote work within six months, but instead of returning to work, they quit. For example, Elizabeth, a 37-year-old Latina mother of two young children who worked as a pediatric physical therapist, explained that for the first few months of the pandemic, she worked from home, connecting remotely to meet her physical therapy patients. Though childcare concerns were among her reasons for quitting, the nature of her job made remote work as a physical therapist unreasonable:

> When the pandemic started, we had to go remote, and as a physical therapist it's kind of difficult to do remote. So, I did that for the rest of the school year, and then I decided to quit because, number one, it was too difficult to continue remotely . . .

She was devastated to leave a job she loved and looked forward to returning to work once her family made post-pandemic arrangements. For the short term, however, despite technological access to her patients, her job was not achievable remotely.

Respondents with structural challenges to remote work that made them not want to continue working remotely described very little productivity in their jobs, even though they often worked longer hours from home. Anna recalled the overwhelming feeling in March 2020, "planning out what school would look like, and how often were we going to meet, and just knowing that you couldn't replicate your entire school day on Zoom". Despite the extra time and effort, many workers in jobs that required human skill transfer—and their partners—described logistical challenges getting work online and transferred to a virtual platform, and yet reported that their work was still less effective than it would be in person. Irene, a 39-year-old white lawyer, shared two young children with her husband, Zach, a high school biology teacher. She recalled observing her husband's struggle.

> I remember trying to get the kids up and fed breakfast, and there's us while he was Zooming–because high school starts earlier–and just him staring at a sea of just black boxes, or like when they had to turn on their cameras, they would have all of their cameras just facing the ceiling. And he would try to crack jokes and he's not a morning person, so I saw how hard he was trying to engage with people over a video, so he was really, really trying to knock it out of the park. . . . He's really struggling. I feel like the job for him has gotten harder and harder.

Brian, a white 43-year-old father of three who worked more than forty hours a week as high school history teacher, spoke directly about the inadequacy of teaching remotely: "The online learning that I was able to provide is nowhere near adequate. It's just not". Teaching serves as a prime example of a job that *seems* to accommodate remote work arrangements but, because of the human interaction innate in the job, proved poorly suited to be conducted remotely.

Furthermore, many workers reported enjoying the human interaction element of the job above all and missed working directly with people. Toni, a 43-year-old Black community college instructor and mother of one, explained: "I'm a teacher because I love people, and it was really difficult not to have contact with my students". Adam, a white 50-year-old father of two young teenagers, taught a special education class and also missed the connection with his students while working from home: "That's the toughest thing. You don't get to see them every day and you don't get to be around them every day, and that was the most difficult thing". The lack of personal connections in remote work made working from home ineffective and dissatisfying for those whose jobs depend on in-person interaction for their success.

Respondents with a poorly suited remote job often shouldered the family's temporary increase in childcare as well, taking on this role for their families despite the challenge in their paid work. Irene, the lawyer married to the history teacher, exemplified a partner (often a higher-earning man, though in this case a woman) who simply assumed that the

partner working from home would be responsible for childcare. She expected her husband to oversee their children in addition to teaching remotely when she returned onsite:

> When things started to lift a little bit and we could go in [to courthouses and jails in person], . . . [I knew] he could be here, he could teach from home. That let me be able to go in [to work]. . . . So, Zach was holding it down at home hard, while I was . . . trying to make myself available to go in.

But because respondents with jobs poorly suited to remote work already faced obstacles to conducting their jobs from home, any additional challenges that arose in the pandemic, such as increased childcare responsibilities, had a multiplicative effect. Some, like Anna, stoically took on the family's childcare responsibility, as just another obstacle in an already difficult work experience:

> That was a little bit challenging for me when I was hunting down my own students' work, and then to look and be like, "What? You don't have this done?" and then to get them to get their own things done, too.

For Elizabeth, the complication of childcare made remote work too overwhelming to continue. She and her husband began the pandemic both working from home but found that arrangement "very tricky because we're both on our computers trying to work while our kids are home, too". Not long afterwards, Elizabeth quit to focus on the family's childcare responsibilities. The transformation of the home into a workspace, together with overlapping responsibilities of childcare during the pandemic, made this challenging arrangement unsustainable and deepened the desire to stop working remotely.

Some respondents in a job poorly suited to remote work identified positive aspects to working from home, but not enough that they wanted to keep working remotely any longer than necessary. When Anna listed the positive aspects she found to working from home, she still couched all of her positivity with expressions of dissatisfaction.

> There were good things about it and there were bad things about it. I liked that I could sit on my living room couch and teach, and . . . I liked the flexibility [to] eat lunch at home . . . and that part I really liked. It was really hard, though.

Even the most supportive employers could not make these jobs satisfactory. Toni took a generous view of her administration's efforts during the pandemic:

> Nobody in living memory has experienced anything like this. There were a few things that maybe they could have done differently, but overall, I truly believe—even though I know it's always faculty against administrators, I still think they did the best that they knew how to do.

Respondents whose jobs were ill-suited to remote work faced challenges working from home in the pandemic without physical proximity to their students and clients. Respondents like Brian and Elizabeth depicted the strain and dissatisfaction they felt from the abrupt transition to remote work, grappling with heightened stress levels and a pervasive sense of inadequacy. Even as they acknowledged the minor comforts of home and flexibility, they longed to return to work in-person to foster the human connections central to their roles. They worked remotely only in response to the pandemic, and they transitioned back in person—or quit—within six months.

3.3.2. Preference to Return on Site

Workstyle Preferences Reinforcing on Site Work

Beyond the respondents whose jobs were poorly suited to remote work, another group of five women did not want to keep working remotely after the pandemic, despite jobs that were compatible with remote work, because they did not enjoy that workplace arrangement. None of them returned to work immediately: all of them worked from home for six months or more, with three staying remote for more than a year. One of the first to return in person was Jenny, a 41-year-old Latina mother of one teenager, who appreciated the convenience

of her home-based workspace yet yearned for more professional interactions and struggled with her coworkers' time management.

> People weren't respecting other people's time. When we were having meetings, they weren't showing up, or some people are laying on their sofas. And a lot more was being asked of me from my bosses. I'd receive calls an hour off the clock asking me to redo work I'd sent days earlier. Boundaries were being blurred because we were working from home. So, I tried to keep my work hours, but they weren't being respected.

Jenny wanted to work from her office as soon as she had an option to return. Temporarily back at home at the time of her interview while her office underwent repairs, she was eager to return on site. "I've been working from home . . . and I'm hopefully back in the office tomorrow. So, everything's packed up to take with me back to the office tomorrow, so I'm hoping I'm back tomorrow. . . . I'm ready to go back".

Another respondent, Denise, a Black mother of three, struggled to work remotely for over a year in a social work organization supporting the homeless. Her job was compatible with remote work, and before the pandemic, she thought she would like working from home: "Working full time, [I thought it would] just be easier just to do the type of job that I do from home because I just talk to people on the phone all day". Denise discovered during the pandemic that she preferred to be around her colleagues because her job was emotionally challenging. When asked if she would like to continue working from home after the pandemic, she was certain that she would not:

> No, no, because what I do for work, it's a lot of emotion . . . It's a job where you can't do it by yourself—I learned during the pandemic, I need to be with other adults when I'm doing my work because with my colleagues, you have a little time to vent or talk about other things to get your mind off maybe a sad story you just heard. . . . No, no, no, . . . [working from home] everybody is isolated.

Her preference to work in person reflected her personal work style, collaborating with others, rather than a compromised element of her job.

Unlike the respondents who worked from home during the pandemic, Edith, a 38-year-old white office secretary and mother of four, had the choice whether to work in her office or from home and decided to report to her office. She appreciated that she could stay onsite: "I like what I do. I can't work remotely, I don't have it in me". She understood that remote options benefitted many companies and workers during the pandemic, but she preferred to work in person.

Pandemic-Era Childcare Struggles Reinforcing on Site Work

Others who worked from home found the experience of simultaneously working and providing care for young children during the pandemic so challenging that it colored their perception of remote work going forward, especially if they were alone at home while their partners worked onsite. Delilah, a 34-year-old white woman with two children, worked remotely in sales for an aerospace company while her husband worked in person as a civil engineer. She felt the pressure of being the primary caregiver during work hours, especially without the teamwork that households with two remote workers could share. Before the pandemic, she had negotiated a flexible work arrangement to be present for her daughter's in-home speech and physical therapy, but since transitioning to remote work full time, Delilah found it overwhelming to manage both work and childcare without additional support.

> My newest baby requires a lot of attention. She wants to be held all day. She cries over anything, and she makes it very hard to work, as you can tell. . . . I don't know [how to cope with that], to be honest with you. You just kind of have to deal with it.

Similarly, Denise felt overloaded by her additional childcare requirements because she already had more work responsibilities than usual after transferring to a remote platform:

> [It was] really hectic during the pandemic, actually, because I had to do my job full time at home now and help my youngest child with school more than--I mean, I had to help both kids, but the youngest child needed more attention. I couldn't take time off of work because I was already home. So . . . it was just really challenging.

The requirement to provide childcare during work hours, especially on their own, frustrated these respondents, and even though the lack of childcare was temporary and specific to the pandemic, it shaped their distaste for remote work.

But like those with jobs ill-suited to remote work, even those workers who preferred on-site work felt some positive outcomes to working from home. Jenny cultivated healthier habits: "I [used to work] through my lunch, I'd do the working lunches. So, I'm making it a point when I'm [home], I shut down for my half hour, 45 min lunch". Denise found positive aspects to working from home as well.

> I liked being home. I like that I didn't have to commute anymore. I was . . . making my own coffee, cooking my own food, and things like that, so I did appreciate that. And I spent more time with the family because I was home, I was with my kids all the time, so I did enjoy that aspect of working from home.

Her enjoyment paled in comparison to her challenges when working from home: "There are some days I would cry because it would just be so . . . overwhelming".

3.4. Responses to Post-Pandemic Employer Demands

Since working from home during the pandemic, our respondents identified the autonomy, flexibility, and reclaimed time that remote work offers. However, they also identified blurred boundaries between professional and personal spheres and a sense of isolation from colleagues, as well as heightened childcare responsibilities because of pandemic-era closures. Some respondents already knew their employers' plans for workplace arrangements post-pandemic while others were waiting for a final decision, but all had preferences for whether or not they wanted to work from home going forward. Some respondents learned that their employers' post-pandemic work arrangements aligned with the worker's own preferences. For instance, Joe was relieved that he would not have to return in person.

> I don't want to go back to the office. . . For me, normal is just a lot of stress [and] constant worry about everything I had to get done. . . Once they announced that we could keep this arrangement, it was like, "Okay, great". It just works for me. It just worked for us as a family.

When employers encouraged workers to return in person as soon as possible, other respondents felt they had no option but to acquiesce to protect their jobs. Shirley, the paralegal so pleased to avoid her commute, was required to return in person two days a week after almost two years fully remote. She returned as soon as her company requested, intending to keep working in the same job even if she had to commute. Nonetheless, she found the return to the office "difficult because, after two years, I couldn't figure out how to work at work anymore to get work done. There's chatting going on, and they want that face-to-face collaboration, but I'm like, 'I'm not getting work done!'" Other respondents were similarly frustrated with the double standard when their employers refused remote options after previously requiring them during the pandemic. Joanna was called back to work fourteen months after the pandemic started, once her team was vaccinated:

> I was annoyed by it, I thought that the pandemic will show them that we can be productive working from home. We didn't have to be a butts-in-seats kind of organization, but they prefer that, so it is what it is.

Remote workers in our sample who did their jobs with more productivity and satisfaction and gained flexibility and control were unhappy when called back to the office full time. But conceding to employer demands was not the only solution for workers facing a challenging work arrangement after the pandemic. Michael, a 48-year-old who

worked multiple jobs in person, was married to an office manager called back to the office full time. Rather than concede completely to her employer, his wife negotiated to keep schedule control:

> So, she worked out a deal with her boss where she took a pay cut but leaves the office at two o'clock so she can pick [our son] up–or I can pick him up if I'm not working. . . .And she's like, "This is stupid, I can do exactly the same work from home", . . . but [the return to office policy] is more of a jealousy thing and a control thing.

Some other women quit, rather than maneuver the heightened work-family conflict during the pandemic. Elizabeth quit working altogether, as did the wives of two other respondents. One of those respondents, Ethan, focused more on his wife's inflexible job as an engineer, rather than the impact of childcare, in her decision to quit:

> Yeah, it was a very difficult decision for her. . . . She had a job that was paying pretty well that she could do remotely. She felt really bad about leaving it. But eventually, she decided that she just didn't like the work that she had to do remotely, and it was too difficult to get to work with the kids. . . . I think if pandemic never happened, she would have continued working the job. I don't think it would have been as stressful as it was if she hadn't started to work remotely.

Other respondents made drastic career choices to ensure that they could continue working from home. Renee quit her job and began working for a private company because she did not know, "with the pandemic, the additional stress of the pandemic and how schools were going to be operating, if this was going to be a sustainable job for me because it was inflexible". Describing her workplace as "stressful anxiety", she began looking for a remote job when her child was sick. She debated conceding to her employer's demands before she determined to move forward elsewhere with her career:

> I was told that I was not allowed to work remotely. . . .Originally, it was kind of like, "Well, I don't want to get behind in my work, so I'll just do it", and finally, I was like, "You know what? No. They're getting more from me, and this is not an option. This is what I have to do for my child. You as an employer are not being flexible. I'm not just going to be working for free, essentially". . . .At this point I was furious. I am not the only mom experiencing this inequity, and the patriarchy, and the system that I was working in. I was fired up about this.

Conversely, some of the respondents who experienced remote work but preferred to work in person made career-changing decisions to ensure that they could work onsite. Rather than stay home, Brandon, a 34-year-old Asian father of one who directed an on-campus college program, switched careers to nursing to get back to work in person. Asked about his career transition, he underlined the importance he felt—despite the health risks—in being around others:

> It was nice because you got to see people again, but at the same time though, you're like, 'Ah, people again! Why won't you wear your mask? Please wear your mask.' So, I enjoy getting the community back. That's nice.

Other respondents had *not yet* made a career-changing decision but indicated that they too would prioritize the flexibility of remote work. Miranda was adamant she would work remotely going forward, "or I'll find another job because it's not negotiable for me. . . so I don't have to make sacrifices like that". Flexibility for childcare was a large motivator for mothers considering remote options in the future, even when the mothers would prefer to work in person. Jennifer, a white 32-year-old university administrator and a new mother whose maternity leave ended as the pandemic began, could not fathom working without at least hybrid remote access.

> I go back and forth [between fully remote and hybrid arrangements]. I think if I were in a role that I understood and I didn't need to build a team or feel that

> connection, I think it would depend on that piece, the flexibility. . . .So, I definitely have been exploring what are the options for remote work, but I think I'd also be open to something that was like one or two days in the office. . . .Well, it can be done [fully remotely], it doesn't necessarily mean it's done the best way.

Likewise, Irene explained that the benefits of working from home are too great to ignore. When looking for a job in the future, she will necessarily look for hybrid flexibility:

> It's not my preferred way of working, I don't find myself terribly effective when I'm working from home. That being said, I have to take a job where working from home is sometimes permitted or encouraged, just in case these guys get sick again. . .. I don't feel like I have the option of taking a job where the management isn't comfortable with there being work from home options.

The interest in remote work extended even to several respondents who worked in person during the pandemic, attracted by the flexibility they had learned it offered. For example, Connie, a 33-year-old white mother of one, worked in her son's preschool during the pandemic and, preparing to move to another state, would look first into remote positions for a new job.

> Ideally [I'd be remote], I feel like, just to have that flexibility . . . School's out in June . . .what am I going to do for childcare if my husband's working full time and my kid's no longer in school? . . . What can you do? I mean other than . . . doing something remotely where I can do it at whatever time I have available.

In navigating the post-pandemic work environment, respondents weighed their options, seeking a balance between the newfound autonomy and flexibility of remote work with the tangible and intangible costs of adhering to or resisting employer demands, all while managing personal responsibilities and career trajectories.

4. Discussion

Our study of work experiences during the pandemic among dual-earner families with children reveals that the allure of flexibility, higher productivity, and eliminated commutes motivated the majority of our respondents and their remote working partners to continue remote work in some capacity in the future. The respondents explained that a pivotal determinant of remote work's desirability was the job's intrinsic compatibility with remote technology. The ease or challenge of transitioning to a remote setting influenced whether the experience of working from home was positive or negative. For jobs that seamlessly adapted to a remote environment, participants reported an overall positive experience, underscored by enhanced job satisfaction and productivity. However, for those whose roles were poorly suited to remote work, the experience was challenging.

Another salient theme was the newfound flexibility that remote work brought to respondents' schedules and lives. The ability to mold work schedules around the ebbs and flows of family life was not merely a logistical advantage but also contributed to enhanced job and life satisfaction. The popularity of hybrid work models, which combine in-person and remote work, reflects a growing demand for work arrangements that offer both structured interaction onsite and autonomous flexibility from home.

One of the pandemic challenges of working parents was the closure of childcare and schools. While this complicated the lives of all working parents, most workers did not conflate the difficulty of maneuvering childcare during the pandemic with problems working effectively from home. The influence of pandemic-era school closures caused a small subset of workers to avoid future remote arrangements, but more often, parents valued remote work more because of its potential for flexibility and support for their families in the future.

Finally, eliminating travel time enhanced remote work experiences for many respondents. The absence of stressful commutes saved time, reduced their costs, and allowed for better work–life balance. Without rush-hour travel, workers better integrated their children's routines and personal activities into their work schedule. Overall, eliminating

a traffic-filled commute increased desire for remote work in the future, through either full-time or hybrid models.

The power to choose whether to work in a remote or hybrid arrangement, or to come to a worksite in person, was highly valued by our respondents. While some individuals expressed relief and satisfaction at the prospect of continuing to work from home, others faced the challenge of employers insisting on a return to in-person work. Some workers acquiesced to managers' demands or leveraged their arrangement against other schedule needs, but a significant subgroup found remote work to be non-negotiable. They shared a willingness to take drastic steps to align their work situations with their desired arrangements: several quit or changed transferred jobs to realize their desired work arrangement, and still others indicated that they *would* quit or change careers to maintain workplace control. The narratives revealed a diversity of experiences as the pandemic receded: some fathers and mothers were so attached to their jobs that they would give up remote work at their employers' insistence in order to stay, while others prioritized control of their work location by changing jobs (or threatening to do so) to maintain the ability to work remotely. However, all respondents who reported they left a job or would do so because they considered remote work access as a necessity were mothers. These stronger responses to schedule control and access to remote work among mothers were not defined by the respondent's own income or percentage of household income, but by a combination of personal, household, and caregiving needs that fell disproportionately on mothers.

In the post-pandemic work era, worker preferences will be crucial in developing work environments that are conducive to organizational productivity and supportive of well-being and life satisfaction. These narratives underscore the desirability of work policies that allow schedule flexibility and control, underlined by those willing to quit work or change jobs to find remote or hybrid options.

5. Conclusions

The narratives of individuals who embraced working from home during the pandemic reveal its transformative potential. Remote work increased productivity and job satisfaction, while allowing respondents to spend more quality time with their families due to their flexible schedules and elimination of long commutes. Yet, the pandemic also forced some jobs to be conducted remotely without careful consideration of how to perform them competently from home.

Our study is limited because we collected data from only one partner in each couple, which means our findings offer a single-sided narrative, potentially missing the differing perspectives that might have been captured through dual interviews. Future research could encompass a wider variety of family structures and include perspectives from both partners when present. Another limitation comes from the relatively small sample. Our sample includes respondents of various racial and ethnic groups, but because there was no over-sample, between-group comparisons in this sample were not possible. Further, the small sample limits us in identifying the respondents' occupations that were ill-suited to remote or hybrid work, and we look to future work to assess a broader range of occupations that might be poorly suited to remote or hybrid work arrangements.

Our findings also reflect the influence of gender on the experiences of parents working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within dual-income families, women often bore the brunt of childcare and household responsibilities when working remotely, especially when they were the sole remote worker in the household. Whether this pattern continues now that schools and childcare centers have reopened has become an urgent question, underscoring the need to extend a more gender-focused analysis of remote work in families, and include households with different income-earning arrangements.

Parents found working from home during the pandemic to be a positive experience generally, with the key exception of those who could not access from home the human connection necessary for their job tasks. Most workers whose jobs transferred well to

remote access, however, found remote work to be an effective option for work flexibility, and hope to remain in a remote or hybrid job into the future.

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Note

[1] Four of the respondents who worked on site during the pandemic (only one of whose partners worked from home, partners of the other three also worked on site) expressed interest in a hybrid work arrangement in the future. The remaining fourteen respondents who worked on site (seven of whose partners worked remotely, and seven whose partners worked on site) did not want to work remotely, often because their jobs (like gardening or hospital lab work) required an on-site presence.

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Understanding Gender Disparities in Caregiving, Stress, and Perceptions of Institutional Support among Faculty during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sarah Thébaud [1,*], Charlotte Hoppen [1], Jennifer David [1] and Eileen Boris [2]

[1] Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA; charlottehoppen@ucsb.edu (C.H.); jdavid@ucsb.edu (J.D.)
[2] Department of Feminist Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA; eboris@ucsb.edu
* Correspondence: sthebaud@ucsb.edu

Abstract: The loss of the care infrastructure that occurred during the COVID-19 crisis exposed society's continued reliance on women and mothers as default caregivers. But less is known about how this crisis produced gendered mental health outcomes, especially in occupations characterized by intensive work cultures such as academia. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative responses from a May 2021 campus-wide survey of faculty at a large research university in the United States, we explore gendered patterns in faculty caregivers' time use, stress, and perceptions of institutional support. Our findings demonstrate that childcare responsibilities were not merely more substantial for women than men in terms of hours, but they were also qualitatively different, with women's hours being more unpredictable, interruptive, and mentally and emotionally demanding. We also show that the pandemic took a higher toll on women faculty's mental health compared to men's. This gap in mental health emerged not merely because women were spending more time caregiving on average, but also because the university's policies did not effectively support the most strained caregivers. This study contributes empirical evidence to research on academic caregivers during the pandemic and to work demonstrating how (1) gendered caregiving dynamics shape mental health and remote work experiences and (2) the reliance on individual solutions to balancing work and family has failed even relatively privileged workers.

Keywords: caregiving; COVID-19; gender; academia

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1. Introduction

"Mothers Are the 'Shock Absorbers' of Our Society". "Pandemic Imperils Promotions for Women in Academia". "Women are Not OK". "When Schools Closed, Americans Turned to their Usual Backup Plan: Mothers" (Grose 2020; Scheiber 2020; Peck 2020; Miller 2020). Journalistic headlines such as these announced a differential impact of remote learning and working on the health, welfare, and work-life of those who were disproportionately likely to take up care for dependents across the generations: women[1] tending to children, elders, and others who require aid in undertaking the quotidian tasks of daily renewal. The crisis of the pandemic appeared as a crisis in care, exacerbating long-term social and cultural divisions of labor (OECD 2021). In particular, the loss of safety net structures like in-person schooling and formal childcare revealed just how much society still falls back on mothers as default caregivers (Calarco et al. 2021; Dunatchik et al. 2021).

Since then, researchers have been documenting the short- and long-term impacts that this crisis had on women's career outcomes and on the gender division of labor (e.g., Collins et al. 2021; Carlson and Petts 2022; Dunatchik et al. 2021). In the case of academia, inquiries have primarily focused on the issue of research productivity. Faculty overall were less productive during the pandemic, but gender and caregiving status also shaped productivity levels (Carpenter et al. 2021). Women faculty members with school-age children were faced

with additional childcare obligations, resulting in less time for research (Deryugina et al. 2021; Riley et al. 2021; Skinner et al. 2021).

Studies also show that faculty members in general, but especially women, experienced heightened levels of stress due to the increase in childcare obligations during the pandemic (Chesley 2021; Davis et al. 2022). Universities responded by asking faculty to document caregiving-related research disruptions through "COVID impact statements". Yet, during the pandemic, universities also increased workloads by requiring faculty to revamp courses for remote delivery and adding a host of pandemic-related service obligations.

There remains a dearth of research that aims to understand, in detail, the ways in which childcare demands shaped faculty experiences during the pandemic. In particular, little has been documented about the magnitude of gender differences in the subjective emotional experiences of faculty caregivers and how aspects of the caregiving context, such as having a young child, having remote schooling obligations, or having a partner present in the household, shaped time pressures and outcomes like stress. The well-documented culture of overwork in academia (see, e.g., Cech and Blair-Loy 2014; Jacobs and Winslow 2004), as well as pandemic-related increases in work demands, make it an important analytical case for those interested in understanding how professional workers experienced and reacted to the intensity of the time crunch brought on during the crisis. Moreover, little is known about the extent to which universities' institutional response to caregivers during COVID-19 actually eased these burdens or, conversely, may have exacerbated these challenges.

In this study, we bring both quantitative and qualitative data to bear on these gaps in knowledge. First, relying on a campus-wide survey of faculty that was conducted by a large research university in the United States in May 2021, we demonstrate substantial gender gaps among caregivers in childcare time, work–family stress, and perceptions of institutional support. We also show how the presence of remote schooling obligations and young children shaped time use and exacerbated stress and dissatisfaction with the institution's response.

Second, we use our data to investigate the critical question of why the women in our sample experienced so much more stress than the men. Using regression models of quantitative survey responses, we show that the gender gap in stress can be explained by (1) the relatively more substantial increase in childcare hours that women experienced because of the pandemic, and (2) women's substantially lower levels of perceived institutional support. Then, relying on a qualitative content analysis of open-ended survey responses, we develop a more detailed understanding of these gendered patterns. We find that women faculty, who faced a bigger overall time crunch due to additional caregiving responsibilities, were (1) more vulnerable to work interruptions and unpredictability and (2) were more likely to be taking on the mental and emotional labor involved in ensuring their children's well-being. A vast majority of women faculty used extreme terms to describe their overall situation and many reported stress-related mental health challenges—ranging from anxiety to guilt to a lack of motivation. Critically, they frequently attributed these mental health experiences to the university's unwillingness to modify their workload.

Overall, our study contributes empirical evidence to the important and growing body of research on caregivers in the academy during the pandemic and to the broader body of work that demonstrates how (1) gendered caregiving dynamics shape mental health and remote work experiences and (2) the reliance on individual solutions to balancing work and family has failed even relatively privileged workers.

1.1. Women and Employment during the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 led to employees working from home en masse. While parents transitioned to working remotely, many children began online schooling, leaving parents to juggle caregiving, remote schooling activities, and paid work. Recent research has found that families were performing the equivalent of a work week in childcare activities during the pandemic, with mothers taking up a larger share of childcare, even while working full-time

(Calarco et al. 2021; Dunatchik et al. 2021; Sevilla and Smith 2020; Zamarro and Prados 2021). Both mothers and fathers reported an increase in caregiving hours at the beginning of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 (Carlson et al. 2021; Dunatchik et al. 2021). However, once the initial shock of the pandemic settled, the division of labor within households reverted to a pre-pandemic level, leaving mothers to perform most of the housework and caregiving (Carlson and Petts 2022; Carlson et al. 2021; Sánchez et al. 2021).

The pandemic had negative consequences for women caregivers in the workforce. Social distancing measures more commonly impacted female-dominated occupations, as roles in these sectors require more face-to-face interaction with customers than male-dominated occupations (Alon et al. 2020; Power 2020). Inequality in the division of childcare also led mothers with young children to be more likely to reduce paid working hours or to exit the workforce (Hamel et al. 2020; Collins et al. 2021; Petts et al. 2020; Ranji et al. 2021; Zamarro and Prados 2021). COVID-19 was even referred to as a "momcession", as mothers with young children were the population most likely to move from employed to unemployed between 2019 and 2020 (OECD 2021). For women who remained employed, they were more likely to report experiencing negative career outcomes because of the increase in caregiving activities, while men did not report negative career outcomes due to caregiving obligations (Stefanova et al. 2021).

1.2. The Context of Academia

Academic faculty present an important case for understanding how the pandemic shaped professional workers' time use and mental health. The cultural and structural demands characteristic of the faculty role—such as rigid tenure and promotion timelines and expectations, work obligations that are continuous and open-ended in nature, and ideal worker norms—have long been shown to create distinct pressures and conflicts for faculty parents, especially mothers (Cech and Blair-Loy 2014; Ecklund and Lincoln 2016; Minnotte 2021; Misra et al. 2012; Salle et al. 2016). Caregiving responsibilities explain much of the short-term gender gap in research productivity and are also often perceived as a basis upon which one's work and professional legitimacy is evaluated (Morgan et al. 2021; Minnotte 2021; Ollilainen 2019; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2012; Thébaud and Taylor 2021). In short, academic job and workplace characteristics are organized such that they reward faculty who overwork and penalize faculty who engage in or prioritize caregiving.

During the pandemic, faculty workloads increased even further, due in large part to the shift to online instruction and pandemic-related increases in academic service obligations. This increase in workload, which occurred at the same time that childcare and household work demands intensified for parents, left faculty with less time for research-related activities. For instance, the share of women submitting manuscripts for publication decreased at the onset of the pandemic, though they continued to review papers at a rate similar to men (Pinho-Gomes et al. 2020; Squazzoni et al. 2020; Viglione 2020). A study by Carpenter et al. (2021) found that, regardless of gender and caregiver status, almost 80% of faculty reported they were a little less productive during the pandemic, but the effects of caregiving on research productivity were especially damaging for pre-tenure mothers with young children.

Women faculty members were also more likely than men to report that they struggled to manage their time during the pandemic and that their research time decreased (Skinner et al. 2021). Deryugina et al. (2021) found that faculty with small children lost the most research time, with mothers having an hour and fathers a half hour less time than men without children. Other surveys, such as one of 200 Norwegian academics (Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2021), also showed that women with children performed more housework during the lockdown. Indeed, these gendered patterns apply not only to US academics (Carpenter et al. 2021; Chesley 2021; Riley et al. 2021; Skinner et al. 2021), but also to faculty members working across the globe (Deryugina et al. 2021; Pinho-Gomes et al. 2020; Squazzoni et al. 2020). In sum, the lack of time for research activities directly affected tenure-track progress for faculty caregivers, which threatened the career progression of

women caregivers in particular, given the unequal gender distribution of childcare (Riley et al. 2021). As we discuss below, less is known about how these conditions relate to mental health outcomes, or the extent to which institutional responses were able to effectively address this problem.

1.3. Mental Health and Institutional Support

In the US context, the COVID-19 crisis was associated with a deterioration of mental health, especially for women with children. Women with school-age children experienced heightened levels of stress during the pandemic in comparison to women without school-age children (Zamarro and Prados 2021), and there is evidence that the increase in stress that mothers experienced was largely tied to the increase in caregiving activities (Cheng et al. 2021; Hoppen 2023; Umamaheswar and Tan 2020).

Studies focusing on the academic context more specifically suggest an amplification of this gendered pattern. Indeed, all faculty members, even those without caregiving obligations, found the university environment stressful, citing high levels of burnout and low levels of well-being (Urbina-Garcia 2020). Yet, even prior to the pandemic, women were more likely to be stressed by caregiving obligations and gender discrimination than men, a dynamic that contributed to gender gaps in productivity (Eagan and Garvey 2015). These stressors were exacerbated when COVID-19 began, which fueled substantially higher levels of stress in women faculty members than in men (Chesley 2021; Davis et al. 2022; Gewin 2021; Housel 2021). For instance, a Stanford University study by Chesley (2021) showed that 60% of women faculty reported experiencing "a lot more stress" due to caregiving and work obligations compared to 49% of men faculty. A Canadian survey (Davis et al. 2022) similarly concluded that women and racial minority faculty members experienced higher levels of stress and social isolation. They also found that an increase in caregiving activities performed by women impacted productivity levels (Davis et al. 2022). Furthermore, there is evidence that women faculty experienced greater pressure than men faculty to engage in unrewarded academic labor, such as by providing emotional support to students (Górska et al. 2021; Pereira 2021).

Caregivers also reported needing additional institutional support while they were providing care for family members (Soria et al. 2020). Prior to the pandemic, women faculty reported that paid parental leave and adequate childcare were important factors in their ability to do research (Lester and Sallee 2009; Morgan et al. 2021). But when institutions encounter crises, commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion are often overlooked; it takes purposeful and coordinated work among university administrators to ensure that this does not happen (Clark et al. 2022). When childcare centers and schools closed, many parents lost their primary form of childcare. One survey of faculty and students showed that mothers encountered a lack of institutional support, which served as a barrier to their academic success during the pandemic (Bender et al. 2021). Other research has emphasized how women felt unable to meet "institutional expectations", such as new remote teaching, when institutions did not acknowledge the need to adjust work performance expectations, provide more generous leave, or offer childcare or online tutoring supports (Kasymova et al. 2021). Similarly, faculty reported experiencing stress related to the tenure clock, and recommended tenure track-extension policies as work slowed due to personal circumstances (Gonzales and Griffin 2020). It is unknown in our empirical case whether the institutional response by the university was sufficient to ease the stress that faculty caregivers, especially women, experienced, nor which forms of institutional support would have been preferred by parents. We speak to this gap by specifying why and how women faculty experienced heightened levels of stress and perceived a lack of institutional support.

1.4. Present Study

The goal of this study is to investigate how gender, in the context of the structural changes associated with the pandemic, such as school closures and the loss of childcare for

young children, is associated with time-use patterns, work–family stress levels, and perceptions of institutional support among faculty. Furthermore, we investigate the questions of why and how men and women experienced the pressures of the situation differently and reacted to the institution in different ways. This research provides important implications for women working in academia and for universities seeking to create more equitable policies that advance the status of women and caregivers on the job. Our analysis reveals that, whereas some fathers experienced similar challenges and frustrations to mothers, on average, mothers experienced a more intensified time-bind that institutional responses failed to alleviate.

2. Data and Methods

This is a case study of how faculty members experienced caregiving and work-life stressors during the pandemic within the context of a single university. Our data are drawn from a university-wide, IRB-approved campus climate survey that was conducted at a large research university on the west coast of the United States in May 2021. The survey, which was administered by the institutional research department, was concerned with "behaviors and attitudes within a workplace or learning environment . . . that can influence whether an individual feels personally safe, listened to, valued, and treated fairly and with respect". Surveys were distributed to all campus constituents and administered through a secure and confidential online portal. Each faculty member, staff member, and student received a mail-merged email with a personalized link. The response rate for the faculty sample was 45.5%, which is higher than several comparable studies that rely on faculty samples (Carpenter et al. 2021; Chesley 2021; Sevilla and Smith 2020; Skinner et al. 2021).

Two of the authors of this paper participated in the study design. Specifically, we included a module that had questions only for respondents who identified as caregivers. After asking respondents to identify for whom they provided caregiving (e.g., children, parents, partners, elders, or other family, friends, or loved ones), the module questions focused on their time use, such as the number of hours per week they currently spent on caregiving compared to before the pandemic, their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the extent to which current work and caregiving demands caused stress, and their satisfaction with the university's provision of caregiving accommodations. Finally, open-ended questions at the end of the module solicited comments on the problems that respondents faced with research, teaching, and work–life balance due to caregiving obligations and prompted them to offer feedback on the institution's response.

We restrict our sample to faculty respondents who reported that they were parents of, or had significant caregiving responsibilities for, a child under the age of 18 (N = 181). About three quarters of the sample reported that they had taken on remote schooling responsibilities (See Table 1). In the university community, as well as the surrounding counties, public school instruction was fully remote until March of 2021, though several private schools resumed in-person instruction in the fall of 2020. University instruction was also fully remote until September 2021, and the university childcare center was closed through the fall of 2020 and ran on limited capacity until early 2021. Because the survey was conducted in May 2021, it occurred during a time in which the experience of remote work was ongoing and remote schooling and limitations on childcare had, for many, only recently concluded.

In April of 2020, the institution announced a COVID-19 caregiver policy that applied equally to male and female faculty. It emphasized that instruction was an essential activity and departments needed to make the continuation of courses a priority. Individual faculty could request, per approval of their department chair and the university's personnel department, a very short (16 day) paid administrative leave, or a personal leave without pay. Whether lightened teaching or service was possible was at the chair's discretion; if accommodations were made, it depended on both the needs of a given department and an individual's willingness to risk retaliation or unfavorable evaluation as a consequence of such a request. Assistant professors were offered a modest childcare allowance to help

offset caregiving costs, and they could extend the tenure clock for up to a year if they put in a formal request to do so. By contrast, there were no modifications to merit or promotion clocks or childcare subsidies offered to tenured and non-tenure track faculty. The university's academic personnel system encouraged a "COVID-19 impact statement" to explain significant disruptions from care duties or illness to be included in merit and promotion cases.

Table 1. Variable means for faculty caregivers with children, by sex.

	Male	Female	Total	SD
Professional hours per week	49.22	47.28	48.37	14.65
Housework hours per week	16.67	16.01	16.39	9.11
Caregiving hours per week	25.59	33.73 **	29.14	17.31
COVID-19-related increase in				
caregiving hours per day	4.07	5.06 *	4.50	2.71
Work–family stress index	3.50	4.00 ***	3.72	0.96
Institutional support index	3.22	2.92 *	3.07	0.90
Remote school (1 = yes)	0.73	0.76	0.74	
Partner (1 = yes)	0.81	0.90	0.85	
Child under 5 years (1 = yes)	0.16	0.24	0.19	
Tenured (1 = yes)	0.69	0.59	0.65	
Age				
45 and under	0.38	0.46	0.41	
46 to 55	0.40	0.42	0.41	
55 +	0.22	0.13	0.18	
Discipline				
Natural sciences	0.35	0.14 **	0.26	
Engineering	0.21	0.09 *	0.15	
Social sciences	0.19	0.37 **	0.27	
Arts and humanities	0.25	0.41 *	0.32	
White (1 = white)	0.67	0.71	0.69	
Female (1 = female)	0.44			
N	102	79	181	

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ two-tailed test for means between male and female samples.

2.1. Dependent Variables

Our dependent variables capture (1) time use, (2) stress, and (3) institutional support.

Time use—We investigate four variables related to time use. The first three variables reflect weekly hours spent on professional work, housework, and caregiving. Specifically, faculty members were asked how many hours per week they spent, on average, on (a) "Professional work (teaching, mentoring, service, professional activities, research)", (b) "Housework and home maintenance (e.g., cooking, cleaning, shopping)" and (c) "Caregiving (e.g., meeting the needs of children, spouse, adult dependents)". The fourth variable measures respondents' estimates of the daily increase in caregiving hours that occurred because of the pandemic: "Since the COVID-19 crisis began last March, approximately how many more hours per day do you spend caregiving now compared to before the pandemic?".

On average, participants reported spending nearly 49 h on professional work, 17 h on childcare, and 30 h on caregiving (see Table 1). However, large gender differences emerged in caregiving hours, with women reporting that they spent nearly nine more hours

caregiving per week. Women also reported a significantly larger increase in childcare hours per day than their men counterparts (about five hours versus four hours, respectively).

Work–family stress—Faculty members were asked a series of questions concerning their stress related to work and caregiving obligations. These included the extent to which a respondent reported experiencing stress related to (1) current work and caregiving demands, (2) a lack of childcare, (3) managing caregiving responsibilities, and (4) managing household responsibilities. Outcomes were measured on a five-point Likert scale, with higher values indicating higher levels of stress (e.g., 1 = not at all, 5 = very much). We calculated the mean of these variables to create a work–family stress index ($\alpha = 0.89$).

Table 1 shows that, on average, women respondents reported high levels of stress, with a mean of four on the five-point scale. Men scored significantly lower than women on this measure (mean for men = 3.5).

Institutional support—Faculty members were also asked to report the extent to which they (1) felt that the university community supported them and those in their care, (2) felt the university supported their efforts to combine new caregiving demands with their career, and (3) were satisfied with the university's caregiving accommodations due to COVID-19 disruptions. Each variable was measured on a five-point Likert scale, where higher numbers indicate a higher level of perceived institutional support (e.g., 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). We then constructed an institutional support index, which is calculated as the mean of these three items ($\alpha = 0.87$). Higher values on the institutional support index indicate higher levels of perceived institutional support.

Table 1 shows that the means for the institutional support index variable differ by sex. Women respondents did not feel particularly supported, scoring a mean of 2.92; by contrast, men reported moderate levels of support (mean for men = 3.22).

2.2. Key Independent Variables

Our key analytical interest is in understanding how gendered family dynamics, in combination with COVID-19-related structural constraints like school closures and a lack of childcare and family structures, such as the presence or absence of a partner, shaped caregivers' time use, stress, and perceptions of support. As such, our key independent variables of interest include female, the presence of remote schooling obligations, partnership status, and the presence of young children.

Female—Participants who indicated that their sex assigned at birth was female were coded 1 (male = 0).

Remote schooling—The presence of remote schooling obligations was captured with a binary response to the question: "Have you had additional remote schooling responsibilities for children?" (1 = yes).

Partnership status—Participants who indicated that they have a partner who lives with them in their household were coded 1.

Young children—Respondents who indicated that they were the parent of a child under the age of 5 were coded 1. Nearly 20 percent of respondents reported having a young child (see Table 1).

2.3. Control Variables

In our analysis, we include simple controls for tenure status, age, aggregated discipline, and race-ethnicity.

Tenured—Participants were asked to provide their current departmental rank. A dummy variable was created to capture tenure status (1 = tenured).

Age—Age was measured with a categorical variable: 1 = 45 and under, 2 = 46–55, and 3 = 55+.

Discipline—We include an aggregated discipline variable that was based on the college that a respondent's department belongs to. These included (1) natural sciences, (2) engineering, (3) social sciences, and (4) arts and humanities.

Race-Ethnicity—Participants were asked how they racially identify. A dummy variable was created to indicate whether they identified as white only (1 = yes) and did not identify as a racial or ethnic minority. A total of 69% of respondents identified as white only.[2]

2.4. Open-Ended Responses

As part of our module on COVID-19 and caregiving responsibilities, participants were invited to respond to the following three open-ended questions: (1) What is the biggest problem you are facing with your research, teaching, or work–life balance, due to caregiving obligations? (2) What part of [the university's] response to COVID-19 for caregivers could be improved? (3) And what has been most helpful? We coded text from 157 caregivers of children who responded to at least one of these questions (79 men, 78 women). Of these, the vast majority responded to at least two of the three questions (84%), and over 80% provided detailed responses (e.g., multiple paragraphs with hundreds of words for each question response). Employing an open-coding strategy (Corbin and Strauss 1990), two members of the research team independently coded the open-ended participant responses, separately noting broad themes in participants' experiences. The researchers then examined the frequency of these themes as patterned by gender. After each coder completed their independent coding, the research team compared their initial open codes to determine the most relevant and salient themes. Then, each coder re-reviewed the participant responses and revised the assigned codes according to these analytic themes. Key themes pertaining to mental health outcomes, time use, and perceptions of the university's response emerged across responses to all three questions.

2.5. Analytic Strategy

To investigate the relationships between gender and our key outcomes of interest, we estimate a series of multiple regressions that assess how gender, remote schooling, and family factors are related to time-use outcomes, stress, and institutional support, net of controls. We then estimate a secondary set of models that explore the extent to which time-use variables and institutional support may help explain gender gaps in work–family stress. Finally, we present findings from our inductive, qualitative analysis from the thematic coding of open-ended responses. This portion of the analysis yields important insights into the mechanisms that underlie the gendered patterns that we observe in the survey data.

3. Results

3.1. Modeling Time Use, Stress, and Institutional Support

As noted in Table 1, compared to male respondents, female respondents reported significantly more caregiving time overall, a larger increase in caregiving time as a result of the pandemic, higher levels of work–family stress, and lower levels of institutional support. Table 2 estimates multiple regressions to assess whether these gendered patterns hold when we control for important covariates. Our models also allow us to assess the impact of other key factors—like remote schooling obligations and the presence of young children—on these outcomes.

Models 1 and 2 in Table 2 confirm that male and female respondents reported spending roughly similar amounts of time on both professional work and on housework each week. However, parents with remote schooling obligations did report significant increases in housework hours—about four more hours per week, net of other factors. They also reported a decrease in professional work time, though this coefficient is marginally significant at the $p < .10$ level. Respondents who were living with a partner also reported about 4.5 fewer housework hours per week, net of other factors.

Table 2. Multiple regressions estimating time use, work–family stress, and institutional support.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	Professional Work Hours (Weekly)	**Housework Hours (Weekly)**	**Caregiving Hours (Weekly)**	**Caregiving Hours (Daily Increase Since Covid)**	**Work–Family Stress Index**	**Institutional Support Index**
Key Independent Variables						
Female (1 = yes)	−0.361	−1.238	6.213 *	0.785 +	0.371 **	−0.370 **
	(2.379)	(1.458)	(2.54)	(0.417)	(0.137)	(0.139)
Remote Schooling (1 = yes)	−4.737 +	4.096 *	3.975	1.048 *	0.355 *	−0.399 *
	(2.641)	(1.618)	(2.82)	(0.463)	(0.153)	(0.154)
Partner (1 = yes)	3.876	−4.513 *	−2.764	−0.686	−0.326 +	0.384 *
	(3.216)	(1.971)	(3.434)	(0.563)	(0.186)	(0.187)
Child under 5 yrs (1 = yes)	2.86	0.675	−5.837 +	0.522	0.450 *	−0.353 +
	(3.17)	(1.942)	(3.384)	(0.555)	(0.183)	(0.207)
Control Variables						
Tenure (1 = yes)	1.236	−1.148	−2.581	−0.669	0.0747	−0.252 +
	(2.487)	(1.524)	(2.655)	(0.436)	(0.144)	(0.145)
Age						
Ref. = 45 and under						
46–55	2.27	0.858	−12.25 ***	−0.813 +	−0.578 ***	0.267 +
	(2.742)	(1.68)	(2.928)	(0.48)	(0.158)	(0.159)
55+	6.735 +	−0.101	−20.46 ***	−1.502 *	−0.795 ***	0.439 *
	(3.508)	(2.15)	(3.745)	(0.614)	(0.203)	(0.205)
Aggregate Discipline						
Ref = Natural sciences						
Engineering	2.93	−0.176	−0.343	−0.0131	0.208	−0.368 +
	(3.537)	(2.167)	(3.776)	(0.619)	(0.204)	(0.206)
Social Sciences	−2.512	3.360 +	2.766	0.0203	0.266	0.032
	(3.207)	(1.965)	(3.424)	(0.562)	(0.185)	(0.187)
Arts and Humanities	−2.718	0.168	1.223	0.29	0.157	0.082
	(3.015)	(1.848)	(3.219)	(0.528)	(0.174)	(0.176)
White (1 = yes)	−2.395	−0.223	−1.638	−0.990 *	−0.0396	0.11
	(2.345)	(1.437)	(2.503)	(0.411)	(0.174)	(0.137)
Constant	47.99 ***	17.24 ***	37.31 ***	5.479 ***	3.687 ***	3.141 ***
	(4.766)	(2.921)	(5.089)	(0.835)	(0.275)	(0.278)
Observations	181	181	181	181	181	181
R^2	0.08	0.107	0.249	0.176	0.277	0.176

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; + $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Models 3 and 4 investigate time spent on caregiving. In Model 3, we find a significant main effect of female, confirming that female respondents reported significantly more hours per week on caregiving than men, even after adjusting for key factors like remote schooling. A similar pattern emerges when we consider the relative increase in time spent caregiving: the female coefficient is marginally significant in this model, suggesting that women increased their caregiving time somewhat more than men did, net of other factors. Not surprisingly, parents with remote schooling obligations also reported a substantially larger increase in caregiving time.

Overall, these time-use patterns suggest that women faculty were overloaded: they were maintaining professional and housework activities on par with men counterparts, but they were simultaneously taking on substantially more caregiving. This pattern echoes other studies suggesting that, when women worked from home during the pandemic, they were more likely than men to multitask caregiving with paid work.

Next, Model 5 assesses effects on the work–family stress index measure. Net of other factors, women were significantly more likely than men to report experiencing stress. Faculty who had remote schooling obligations or who had a child under the age of 5 also reported higher levels of work–family stress. By contrast, having a partner in the home appears to have modestly mitigated stress ($p < .10$), perhaps in part because having a partner is also associated with a reduction in housework time (see Model 2). But it is notable that the magnitudes of the female, remote schooling, and young child effects are considerably larger than the effect of having a partner.

Finally, Model 5 examines perceptions of institutional support. Female respondents, respondents with remote schooling obligations, and respondents with young children reported significantly lower levels of institutional support, net of controls. Similar to the pattern for other variables, however, having a partner in the household was associated

with significantly higher levels of perceived support. Overall, this pattern suggests that women, individuals experiencing more caregiving demands, and individuals who do not have a partner available to help, were much more critical of the university's response to the COVID-19-related caregiving crisis.

3.2. Explaining Gender Differences in Stress

One of the major themes emerging in Table 2 is that female respondents experienced higher caregiving demands and stress, and less institutional support, than their male counterparts. Moreover, individuals with greater caregiving demands experienced higher levels of stress and lower levels of institutional support. In Table 3, we investigate the extent to which gendered patterns of time use and institutional support might be able to help explain the higher levels of stress that female respondents reported.

Table 3. Multiple regression estimates for the effects of gender, caregiving, and institutional support on work–family stress.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Key Independent Variables			
Female (1 = yes)	0.371 **	0.243 $^{+}$	0.143
	(0.137)	(0.127)	(0.119)
Remote (1 = yes)	0.355 *	0.203	0.099
	(0.153)	(0.141)	(0.131)
Partner (1 = yes)	−0.326 $^{+}$	−0.226	−0.113
	(0.186)	(0.169)	(0.158)
Child under 5 yrs (1 = yes)	0.450 *	0.410 *	0.290 $^{+}$
	(0.183)	(0.170)	(0.159)
Control Variables			
Tenure (1 = yes)	0.0747	0.172	0.053
	(0.144)	(0.131)	(0.123)
Age			
Ref. = 45 and under			
46–55	−0.578 ***	−0.419 **	−0.367 *
	(0.158)	(0.151)	(0.140)
55+	−0.795 ***	−0.511 *	−0.432 *
	(0.203)	(0.200)	(0.185)
Discipline			
Ref. = Natural Sciences			
Engineering	0.208	0.211	0.075
	(0.204)	(0.185)	(0.173)
Social Sciences	0.266	0.251	0.267 $^{+}$
	(0.185)	(0.169)	(0.157)
Arts and Humanities	0.157	0.115	0.157
	(0.174)	(0.158)	(0.146)
White (1 = yes)	−0.0396	0.0942	0.097
	(0.136)	(0.125)	(0.116)
Mediating Variables			
Caregiving hours per week		0.00452	0.003
		(0.00426)	(0.004)
COVID-19-related increase in caregiving hours		0.128 ***	0.093 ***
		(0.0260)	(0.025)
Institutional support			−0.367 ***
			(0.068)
Constant	3.687 ***	2.819 ***	4.214 ***
	(0.275)	(0.295)	(0.375)
R^2	0.277	0.412	0.501

Note: N = 181; standard errors in parentheses; + $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Model 1 in Table 3 shows the significant and positive main effect of female on work–family stress (this model is identical to Model 5 in Table 2). Model 2 adds the two caregiving

time measures to the model. This model indicates that, net of total caregiving hours, the relative increase in caregiving time during the pandemic is highly predictive of stress. Moreover, the magnitude of the female effect decreases by about 35 percent and becomes only marginally significant. This suggests that some of the female effect can be explained by the structural differences between men and women in terms of the additional caregiving hours that women, compared to men, took on after the initial lockdown.

Model 3 adds the institutional support index to the model. The large, significant, and negative effect of this index indicates that a lack of institutional support drives higher work–family stress levels. After adding this variable to the model, the magnitude of the main effect decreases by another 42 percent, suggesting that a lack of institutional support also contributes to the gender gap in stress levels.

Figure 1 shows the predicted values from these models for men and women. Here, one can visualize more clearly how the magnitude of the gender gap in stress narrows across models. Moving across models, predicted stress values decrease for women and increase for men. Overall, the gender gap in predicted stress shrinks by 62 percent after the two time-use variables and the institutional support index are included in the model.

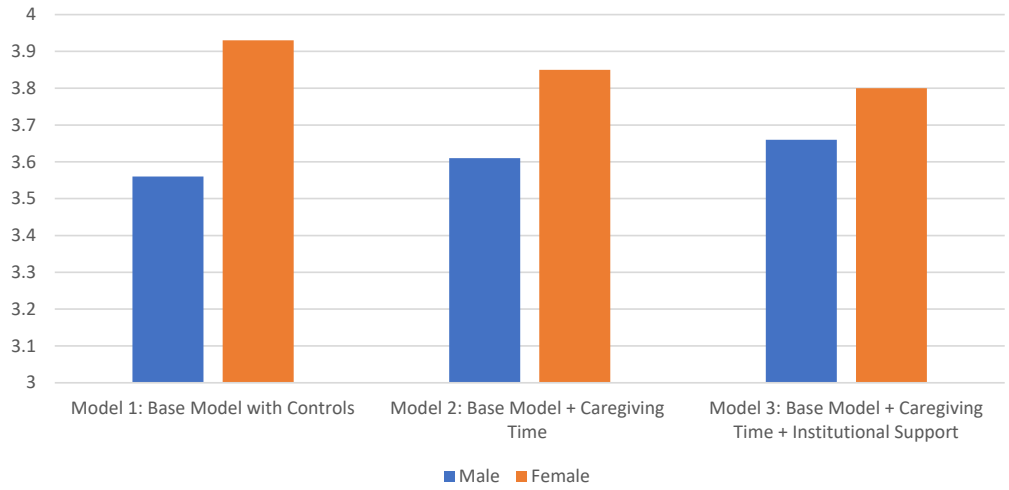

Figure 1. Predicted stress index values by sex.

We also conducted Sobel tests to better understand whether COVID-19-related caregiving hours or, alternatively, institutional support, significantly mediate gender differences in stress. The results of the Sobel test for the institutional support index are statistically significant ($p < .05$) and indicate that this variable mediates 47 percent of the total gender effect. By contrast, the mediating effect of COVID-19-related increases in caregiving hours is marginally significant ($p = .07$) (mediating 30 percent of the total gender effect).

From this analysis, we cautiously conclude that women reported higher levels of stress than men in part because they (1) experienced a more dramatic increase in their caregiving time and (2) felt that they received less support from the institution to help manage those additional time demands. In the next three sections, we discuss our analysis of open-ended responses. The patterns we find give more context and detail to help understand these quantitative patterns.

3.3. Gendered Experiences of Time Demands and Time Use

The most prevalent theme across all the open-ended responses from parents was that they described experiencing a time crunch. Responses like, "Not enough time to cover everything", "too much work to do, not enough time", and "lack of time" were extremely common. Both mothers and fathers described struggles with balancing work and caregiving, especially as normal work hours conflicted with the school day. One mother explained that she "prioritize[s] caregiving during the day and leave[s] major work—and even substantive emails—for after 10 P.M". Others described difficulties with

carving out the large blocks of time necessary for writing and research, or that their "lack of bandwidth" meant that the little time they had for work suffered from a lack of energy and ability to focus. Overall, many parents described spending an increased amount of time on childcare, homeschooling, and/or domestic responsibilities, which reduced their available time for conducting research, writing papers, applying for grants, and preparing for classes, especially given the additional labor involved in transferring courses from an in-person to a remote format.

However, our qualitative data also reveal that faculty's time demands were complex, and gendered, in ways that go beyond the sheer number of hours spent. Although mothers and fathers were similarly likely to characterize the work-from-home environment as "distracting", we found gendered patterns in the ways that parents experienced their professional work time. On the one hand, more than twice as many fathers as mothers complained about a lack of a separate physical workspace or office. "The 'caregiving' itself wasn't a major issue, as my kids are not so young", explained one father, "it was more the distraction and lack of private space in our relatively small personal space". Another lamented about "Not being able to use my [campus] office (escape my kids)" and a third simply stated: "I'm ready to be back on campus and in my building/office". For many fathers, then, the quality of their work time suffered as a result of spatial issues more so than their direct involvement in caregiving per se.

On the other hand, more than twice as many mothers as fathers described experiencing direct interruptions from their children. They were also more likely to describe such interruptions as "constant" or "frequent". As one mother explained, "Even if I have some time for myself and research, the quality is low as I'm frequently interrupted". Another mother wrote that: "Constant interruptions by children mean that the focus needed for writing is not available". Four mothers, but none of the fathers, also raised the issue of children directly interrupting classes or faculty meetings on Zoom. One mother wrote that her child's behavior "disrupts live zoom classes that I give, and sometimes the recordings of asynchronous classes". Two other mothers highlighted this issue when expressing gratitude for their respective departments' flexibility, supportiveness, and understanding when these disruptions occurred: one mother said her "colleagues [are] understanding when my child interrupts meetings and classes", while the other said her colleagues (most of whom also have children) are "understanding when meetings are interrupted by family needs", and that they have been very supportive of one another. That mothers expressed "gratitude" suggests that the language of rights was unavailable to frame institutional reactions to teaching disruptions, and that perceptions of responsibility remained individualized even despite common structural experiences.

In addition, mothers were more likely to encounter unexpected caregiving than fathers. They frequently described their time as "unpredictable" and more commonly referenced the fact that they'd miss entire days of work because of unanticipated childcare demands. For these mothers, work hours were often unexpectedly converted to caregiving hours. Perhaps because of this experience, women were also more likely to describe their need for childcare as a need for "reliable" childcare. These findings echo earlier studies showing how workers with caregiving responsibilities tend to experience unpredictability so often that their work–family lives become "predictably unpredictable" (Heymann 2000); in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, when caregiving demands intensified overall and backup support was less available—and women overwhelmingly became default or fallback caregivers (Calarco et al. 2021)—unpredictability also became a more frequent feature of their lives. These findings also resonate with studies showing that, when mothers work from home, they are less likely to obtain worktime that is completely free from caregiving obligations (see, e.g., Lyttelton et al. 2020).

3.4. Mental Health

Paralleling our quantitative findings, we also found highly gendered patterns in the ways that mothers and fathers talked about their experiences with stress and mental health.

When asked to describe what has been most challenging for them during the pandemic, mothers were far more likely to mention their mental and emotional health. Terms like "stress", "anxiety", "exhaustion", "lack of motivation", "guilt", "burnout", or "mental health" came up more than six times as frequently in the sample of mothers than in the sample of fathers.

When these issues did arise, mothers also described the negative impact of these factors far more intensely than fathers did. For instance, the three fathers who reported mental health issues said they felt "stressed" or "frayed". By contrast, more than 20 mothers indicated mental health issues, which they described with terms such as "emotionally exhausted", "burned out", "stressed", "anxious" (about the safety of their children), and "guilty" (about not spending enough time with their children). Mothers' responses were also more frequently conveyed with a palpable sense of anger at the situation. As one mother explained, "Working has shifted significantly into the evening/night, given my childcare/remote schooling responsibilities during the day. And at the same time, my work responsibilities (such as transitioning courses to remote teaching) expanded exponentially. I have been working on very little sleep, with no breaks, for so long. I am completely drained and dispirited and infuriated". Another mother wrote, "I sacrificed my sleep, sanity, and self-care during the pandemic to remain afloat in my job while caring for children with nearly no help". Mothers, then, not only experienced negative mental and emotional health at higher rates than fathers did, but they also struggled with these experiences more intensely.

Moreover, mothers were far more likely than fathers to describe their negative affect as resulting from their concerns about—or their direct managing of—their children's wellbeing, which further underscored their position as the default, or primary, caregiver. "Dealing with remote schooling and children's emotional state has been taxing and exhausting", wrote one mother. Another reported that she lacked motivation because "Mental energy gets spent on children's wellbeing". A third mother elaborated more on her responsibility for her children's mental health and how she needed to prioritize that over her own work: "I don't have the mental bandwidth to spend all day teaching on zoom and . . . supervising two kids learning from home (zoom) and then be creative. My children have suffered learning loss and the older is depressed and unmotivated. Under these circumstances, research/creative [work] takes a back seat". For some women, the emotional labor also took the form of guilt. For instance, one mother explained that she has been "Feeling guilty that [she is] not spending enough time with [her] children and they need more from [her] than they did when they could spend time in programs and with friends". Although some fathers also described a "frayed" and "stressful" mental and emotional state that stemmed from caregiving-related responsibilities, these issues were largely due to sleep deprivation from shouldering home-schooling and distance learning for their children rather than directly burdening themselves with their children's (negative) mental and emotional health. One notable exception is a father who explained that his "partner is a physician who could remain home at most three mornings per week, so the brunt of the care-giving fell to [him]", adding that his "biggest problem is then either stress from a child fighting me all day or lack of productivity due to this stress (and lack of time)".

Overall, mothers were not only spending more time with their children, but they were also more likely to be taking on the "mental load" and emotional labor (Dean et al. 2022; Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir 2021). Given that the crisis dramatically impacted children's schedules and social lives, the need for this kind of caregiving labor, and especially emotional support, was unprecedentedly high. Our results suggest that the increasing intensity of the emotional labor demands associated with caregiving, in combination with increases in professional workloads and disruptions, created a perfect storm of stress for many mothers.

3.5. Institutional Support

Finally, the themes that emerge from our qualitative data help us to better understand why stress is related to perceptions of institutional support and caregiving experiences. To begin, most of the men and women respondents were aware that the university offered some accommodations for caregivers: only seven (~4%) indicated in their comments that they were unaware of a response on the part of the university. Despite this awareness, however, the vast majority argued that the response was inadequate because it was too slow, and policies were unclear, difficult to use, or would be entirely useless or inapplicable to them. As one father wrote, "[The university] cares but is so slow. By the time all the town halls were over and everyone had a chance to elaborate the nuances of the problem, we had already figured out the problem ourselves. We needed to, because this process took months". Another father's response was, "With [the institution], the response is often 'too little too late'". A mother similarly expressed, "The accommodations, if any, have been slow. They have come only after faculty have demanded them". Respondents also expressed frustration that making use of the resources available required parents' willingness to carry out additional labor and to take on potential career risks. As one mother put it: "When caregivers are already taxed to their limits it makes no sense to require them to jump through additional hoops to *maybe* receive benefits, especially when there's also the perception that such requests can reflect poorly on the person (being seen as needy or wanting handouts)".

However, mothers were far more likely than fathers to critique the adequacy of the university response. For instance, mothers were far less likely than fathers to find the university's response helpful in any respect. When asked "What was most helpful?" a few respondents thought of positive things, such as the lack of a commute, or one department chair's support for teaching schedule accommodations. Tellingly, however, 16 of the female respondents, but only three male respondents, went out of their way to indicate that they felt that the university response had not been helpful at all (e.g., "Nothing. Extraordinarily disappointed in [the institution's] response to caregiving obligations during COVID"; "I can't think of anything"; "I have received no help"; "NADA"). As we discuss below, these differences emerge primarily as a result of mothers' greater need, on average, for workload accommodations.

Specific criticisms of the university response fell into one of two categories: (1) inadequate provision of childcare either directly through campus centers or through childcare subsidies, and (2) inadequate attempts to reduce workloads or to make up time for faculty, in the form of course release or service release (either in the present or in the future), paid leave, deadline extensions, additional TA support, or modifications to productivity demands. Mothers and fathers were similarly likely to lament the lack of childcare, and to express anger and frustration over it. One father wrote: "[The University] completely abandoned its community during COVID when it came to childcare and caregiving. They closed the childcare centers in March with zero communication to parents until well into August—long after all other daycare centers had announced their plans or had reopened". Another father reported, "[We need an] increased number of childcare options. The children's center waitlist is very lengthy and isn't really a viable option for new children of faculty". Similarly, a mother explained, "In my case, the only thing that would help me is additional subsidized childcare, as 50% of my after-tax salary pays for childcare. Additionally, childcare that is full-time would be helpful, and not the extremely truncated hours of [the University's] Children's Center that we have endured during the pandemic".

By contrast, although mothers and fathers both expressed a desire for the university to modify workloads via reduced teaching, service, or research obligations, mothers were more than twice as likely as fathers to mention this issue, and when they did, they discussed it in greater detail and with more intensity. For instance, mothers requested: "more time off. Reduced work responsibilities or expanded breaks between courses", "A true leave from teaching and/or service in order to make up for this lost research time", and "course reliefs and/or supplemental sabbatical credits to give those who have been impacted the research

time they need to get their careers back on track". The fact that women were more likely to say that they wanted the university to give them their "time back" makes sense in light of our finding (above) that women were taking on more of the caregiving labor, were more often multitasking work and care, and were more likely to serve as the primary, or default, caregiver. In other words, the structural imbalance between fathers and mothers in terms of domestic responsibilities meant that mothers, on average, needed an objectively higher level of workload accommodations from the university in order for such accommodations to be perceived as acceptable or sufficient.

Additionally, some mothers, but none of the fathers, framed their desire for more work-time accommodations explicitly in terms of mental health, offering "sanity" and the need to "recover" as justifications: "[We need] teaching releases for parents and caregivers who lost an entire year of research/sanity", "What we really want is the time to pursue our research—or simply to just recover". One mother's comments revealed how the steps the university did take to address mental health were ineffective for those most affected by caregiving-related stress: "I appreciate all the workshops and resources related to mental health and self-care. However, at this point, I'm too tired to attend those. People with caregiving responsibilities are fighting for some more minutes and don't have much time or mental space for these resources. What could be directly helpful is a course release. . . to offset the lost time". This mother's experience underscores our findings, above, that a lack of adequate institutional support (i.e., workload accommodations) directly contributed to women's higher levels of stress.

The connection between mental health outcomes and perceptions of institutional support becomes even clearer when we consider that several of the women—but none of the men—who flagged mental health concerns explicitly connected their experience to the university's response, which they found to be both inadequate and counterproductive. For instance, one mother, who has a toddler and a kindergartener and is in a leadership role in her department, summarized her experience this way:

> "[Childcare and remote schooling] responsibilities have significantly set back my research productivity and had a substantially negative impact on my work-family balance and mental health. The COVID "accommodations" at [the institution] have been nonexistent or would actually create more work/setbacks in the long run in my case."

Along the same lines, another mother who identified as a woman of color reported that "Nothing has been offered that helped me in the moment. All the "help" has been extremely difficult to access and that just gave me MORE STRESS and STOLE MORE OF MY TIME". A third mother, who is single with a disabled child, similarly explained:

> "I simply do not have the hours in the day or bandwidth to manage the responsibilities. . . With the public schools closed and limited respite support, I have spiraled into an impossible work/caretaking situation. This has severely affected my health and wellbeing. I am furious. . . I feel the university has done nothing to support myself and other [faculty] in similar situations."

In summary, while many parents found the institutional support lacking, misguided, or nonexistent, mothers were especially affected by this problem. This, perhaps, is unsurprising given gendered imbalances in caregiving loads and experiences: because more mothers than fathers took on primary responsibility for caregiving, and the university's childcare accommodations and workload accommodations for caregivers were largely inadequate given the extreme time burdens of the COVID-19 crisis, mothers suffered more from institutional shortcomings than fathers did.

4. Discussion

It is well-established that the COVID-19 crisis was a gender-differentiated crisis of care, especially for working parents who faced school closures and the loss of childcare. We contribute to this growing body of work by showing the extent to which the experiences of

faculty—professionals who, by most standards, are fairly privileged in terms of education, job security, and access to benefits—were also highly gender-differentiated and shaped by the lack of an institutional safety net. Our analysis of faculty parents illuminates how childcare responsibilities were more substantial for women than men, both in quantitative magnitude (total hours and relative increase in hours) and in qualitative terms (more interruptions of work time, more multitasking, greater mental and emotional loads associated with care, etc.). Furthermore, our findings suggest that the pandemic took a higher toll on women faculty's mental health compared to men's, not merely because women were spending disproportionately more time and energy on caregiving, but also because the university was unwilling to significantly modify workloads and expectations for faculty caregivers.

Our findings speak to the broader literature on pandemic-related shifts in gender, work, and caregiving, as well as the more specific question of the situation within academia. In a broad sense, our findings specify details about how the mental and emotional load of caregiving is not only gendered in the academic context, but also how that gendering is amplified when structural supports go missing (Calarco et al. 2021; Dean et al. 2022). It also contributes to the more specific literature on academic work and workplaces by suggesting that work-intensive cultures and institutions like those found in academia (Cech and Blair-Loy 2014; Thébaud and Taylor 2021)—which became even more work-intensive during the pandemic—amplified the already deleterious effects that the loss of childcare had on professional workers more broadly. Our analysis suggests that the convergence of these two factors created nearly catastrophic conditions for the workers who are most likely to be tasked with the physical, mental, and emotional responsibilities of care. In particular, our findings regarding the gendered impact of the crisis on mental health should be of interest and concern to (1) scholars who seek to understand how organizational contexts and professional norms produce and exacerbate inequalities and (2) institutional leaders whose goal is to advance gender equity in the academy.

4.1. Limitations

Our analysis is not without limitations. Although we draw our sample from a large research university, and its size and COVID-19 policy response are similar to several others on the West Coast of the United States, our sample is from just one university and as such, our findings are not broadly generalizable to faculty experiences across other universities, or in other state or country contexts. Moreover, although the response rate for the survey approached 50%, our sample size is relatively modest given that we focus on faculty caregivers. This factor limited our ability to include a large number of detailed covariates and to conduct intersectional analyses. The small number of individuals reporting elder and other forms of care also prevented us from being able to undertake a separate, meaningful, analysis of their experiences. And, as with all volunteer-based surveys, individuals self-selected into the survey; as such, we are unable to determine the extent to which selection processes may have shaped our findings.

Our survey measures also have limitations. In particular, our measures of time use are imperfect, given that they are (1) based on self-reports, which are known to be less accurate than time diaries, and (2) time use categories are imprecise and overlapping in nature. Given these caveats, we believe that the emergent patterns in our qualitative data, which indicate that caregiving demands were greater and were experienced more intensely for women than for men faculty, lend validity to the overall patterns that we find in our limited quantitative measures. Unfortunately, the survey also lacked information about the work status, work location, and occupation of a respondent's partner, which prevented us from investigating in detail the extent to which gendered household dynamics may have played a role in shaping our outcomes of interest. Further, there is an urgent need for subsequent research on the caregiving, stress, and institutional support experienced by faculty groups that we were unable to systematically capture with our data, including faculty of color (especially women faculty of color), faculty in same-sex relationships, non-cisgender women, and other populations.

Finally, going forward, additional research would help us to better understand the possible scarring effects of the pandemic on the career trajectories of faculty within academia, as well as how such effects may vary by gender or other factors. We suspect, for instance, that whereas the caregiving crisis is now less acute than it was at the time of the survey, there are likely long-term effects on research productivity, mental health, and perceptions of the institution's ability—and willingness—to support caregivers.

4.2. Recommendations for Universities

The empirical results and open-ended responses together lead us to recommendations that emphasize collective over individual responsibility for the labor of care. Our recommendations pertain to three broad areas: faculty workloads, childcare infrastructure, and faculty engagement.

First, universities must create an environment that grants, and supports the use of, reasonable adjustments to workloads in situations where caregivers are excessively overburdened due to a lack of other supports (as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic). Structurally, this would mean implementing policies that concretely "give time back" to faculty caregivers, regardless of their academic rank and tenure track status. Examples include default reductions in service requirements (e.g., limiting committee assignments), course releases (without reductions in pay), co-teaching opportunities, bridge funding for faculty grant support, or funds for additional teaching or research assistant support (see, e.g., Chesley 2021 for similar recommendations). In order to be effective, however, policies need to be transparent and well-communicated by the institution (see, e.g., Hammoudi Halat et al. 2023), and supported by the faculty and staff at the department level. For instance, to avoid adding time burdens for parents and to minimize power and status differentials that often dissuade individuals from requesting accommodations (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2012), universities should provide default options for modifications from which faculty must opt-out rather than opt-in.

We also support the, now common, practice of requiring tenure and promotion committees to take into account productivity loss associated with the pandemic when evaluating faculty (Gonzales and Griffin 2020). However, such accommodations are also one example of the broader limitations of the university response, which was often "too little too late" (as one participant, above, expressed it). Going forward, universities should be better prepared to respond to caregiving crises *before* they happen, so that when they happen, they are prepared to respond effectively. For instance, universities should have standing, and varied, policy tools that they can implement that would ease workloads on caregivers as soon as a crisis arises, rather than having to make allowances for caregivers' experiences after the fact.

Second, adequate childcare provisions and/or sufficient childcare subsidies are needed, especially in emergency situations like that of COVID-19. Several universities created new childcare resources during the pandemic when faced with the closure of daycare facilities. For example, the University of Michigan provided faculty, staff, and students with free access to a care.com membership and a family-to-family support posting board where parents could provide support and resources to one another. These resources accompanied preexisting resources, which included a childcare center that remained open throughout the pandemic, Kids Kare at Home, Family Helpers, and the Campus Childcare Homes Network (Kaleba 2021). Many of these resources allowed faculty to hire last-minute or ongoing weekday childcare services from students. Similarly, Stanford University provided back-up childcare services to faculty and staff, where members could hire childcare for 10 days/year if their caregiver was unavailable, the school was closed, or flex work was required (Stanford Report 2021). These resources might not have been sufficient but were a step in the right direction when faculty were often faced with little to no childcare options. As universities move forward, it is necessary to rethink how childcare on campus looks, and to devise plans to ensure that all faculty can better manage caregiving and work obligations.

Third, institutions should provide collective rather than individual solutions to disputes, like taking decisions on accommodations out of individual departments, which has led to arbitrariness, and placing them in a more representative committee that includes parents and other stakeholders. Researchers have found that when faculty members have a stake and voice in the formation of the policies made available to them, they are more likely to devise policies that are more useful and result in better mental health (Hammoudi Halat et al. 2023). Devising a large committee of faculty members to represent faculty concerns and voices would be a useful step forward to ensure that needs are being met as we move beyond the pandemic. These members should have their time compensated for either through stipends or through course relief.

More broadly, we emphasize that going forward, universities should regularly conduct faculty campus climate surveys to track change over time. This is critical for understanding the degree to which caregiving and work time crises persist among faculty, how those crises may continue to shape mental health outcomes, and the degree to which there may still be scarring effects of the pandemic on career outcomes, especially for faculty with caregiving responsibilities.

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Notes

[1] We use the term "women" throughout this study in reference to cisgender women. Although it was provided as an option, none of the respondents in our sample indicated that they were intersex or that they preferred to self-identify their gender.

[2] Unfortunately, our small sample size prevents us from including more detailed racial and ethnic categories in our models.

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Article

Inequalities in Academic Work during COVID-19: The Intersection of Gender, Class, and Individuals' Life-Course Stage

Anna Carreri [1,2,*], Manuela Naldini [3] and Alessia Tuselli [4]

[1] Department of Human Sciences, University of Verona, 37129 Verona, Italy
[2] School of Social Sciences, Hasselt University, 3500 Hasselt, Belgium
[3] Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin, 10124 Turin, Italy; manuela.naldini@unito.it
[4] Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, 38122 Trento, Italy; alessia.tuselli@unitn.it
* Correspondence: anna.carreri@univr.it

Abstract: Research studies on academic work and the COVID-19 crisis have clearly shown that the pandemic crisis contributed to exacerbating pre-existing gender gaps. Although the research has been extensive in this regard, it has focused more on the widening of the "motherhood penalty", while other groups of academics are blurred. Even more underinvestigated and not yet fully explained are the intersections between further axes of diversity, often because the research conducted during the pandemic was based on a small volume of in-depth data. By drawing on interview data from a wider national research project, this article aims to contribute to this debate by adopting an intersectional approach. In investigating daily working life and work–life balance during the pandemic of a highly heterogeneous sample of 127 Italian academics, this article sheds light on how gender combines with other axes of asymmetry, particularly class (precarious versus stable and prestigious career positions) and age (individuals' life-course stage), to produce specific conditions of interrelated (dis)advantage for some academics. The analysis reveals three household and family life course types that embody the interlocking of gender, class, and age within a specific social location with unequal, and possibly long-term, consequences for the quality of working life, well-being, and careers of academics, living alone or with parents, couples without children or with grown-up children, and couples with young children and other family members in need of care.

Keywords: academic work; academic career; COVID-19 pandemic; gender; intersectionality; work–life balance; class

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1. Introduction

Despite the increase in the number of women in universities, especially at the early stages of education, significant inequalities persist as academic trajectories progress. In general, studies have revealed that women progress more slowly up the academic ladder, they are more in charge of the less rewarded academic chores, they tend not to easily attain leadership roles, and they earn less than men in comparable positions (Cois et al. 2023; Heijstra et al. 2017; Peterson 2016; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012, 2014). This gender disparity is often captured through three metaphors: the leaky pipeline metaphor (women are more likely than men to drop out of careers), the glass door metaphor (women are less likely to gain access to stable positions) (Picardi 2019), and the glass ceiling metaphor (women are less likely to gain access to top positions). How, in this scenario, did the pandemic crisis contribute to changing academic labor and to modifying pre-existing gender gaps? A huge body of scientific research has addressed this question and shows that COVID-19 contributed to exacerbating pre-existing gender gaps, especially for those in the early stages of their careers and in temporary research positions (King and Frederickson 2021; Douglas et al. 2022; Pereira 2021; Docka-Filipek and Stone 2021; Squazzoni et al. 2021) with possible long-term consequences in terms of career entry and advancement. However, research on gender disparity in academia has not yet explained the mechanisms

and processes behind this widening gender gap and its intertwining with other axes of diversity, such as class (precarious versus stable and prestigious career positions) and age as two highly gendered social phenomena.

This article aims to contribute to this debate by analyzing daily working life and the work–life balance of both early and advanced career academics during the pandemic in Italy through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1989). Specifically, it investigates how gender intertwines with other axes of asymmetry, i.e., class and age, to produce specific conditions of (dis)advantage for some academics.

In the following, after a reconstruction of the State of the Art of recent but burgeoning debates about academic work and gender inequalities during the pandemic (Section 2), we present our intersectional approach (Section 3). Section 4 outlines the empirical research by describing the research context, the data, and the type of analysis we conducted. Section 5 summarizes the results of the analysis through an intersectional lens, which looks at the multiplicative effect in the intersections of different axes within a specific social location. In Section 6 we discuss the results; finally, in the last section, we offer some concluding reflections.

2. Gender Inequalities in Academic Labor during COVID-19: State-of-the-Art Research

Research studies on the impact of the pandemic on academic work and the consequences for careers that account for the gendered and gendering effects of COVID-19 are numerous. The debate has been extensive and is clearly ongoing. Here, we try to summarize some of the main results of the research carried out on the topic and distinguish between them according to the specific topic of investigation.

The first object of inquiry was the impact of the emergency on the time devoted to work rather than to other activities and times of life with comparisons between the experiences of male and female academics (Caldarulo et al. 2022; Derndorfer et al. 2021; Ghislieri et al. 2022; Myers et al. 2020; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2021). These studies show that, among the various components of academic work, time devoted to research was most affected by the pandemic, decreasing by an average of 24% (Myers et al. 2020). However, there are important differences. For example, among the various disciplines, those involving the use of laboratories suffered the most significant setbacks, while regarding gender, the most severe impact was on women and particularly, mothers (Derndorfer et al. 2021; Ghislieri et al. 2022; Myers et al. 2020; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2021).

The second object of inquiry was how remote work (so-called "home-working") was experienced during university lockdowns from a subjective point of view. These studies make it possible to explore the quality of working life. They show how experiences differ greatly not only between women and men but also according to family configuration and the stage reached in an academic career. For example, the research results suggest that academics in the most precarious positions are those who have experienced particularly stressful conditions under the imperative of maximum productivity, with harmful effects on their psycho–physical well-being (Carreri and Dordoni 2020; Docka-Filipek and Stone 2021; Douglas et al. 2022; Hadjisolomou et al. 2022), albeit with variable impact according to the characteristics of the employment contract, the existence of teaching duties, the support of a mentor, cohabitation with others, and belonging to a minority group in terms of nationality, disability, or parental responsibility (Carreri et al. 2023; Douglas et al. 2022; Kınıkoğlu and Can 2021). These studies also show that the pandemic strongly compromised the capacity to concentrate on work, as well as the mental health of women and even more so of mothers (Carreri and Dordoni 2020; Docka-Filipek and Stone 2021; Górska et al. 2021). Furthermore, these studies shed light on a part of academic work, mostly carried out by women, which often remains invisible and which is neither recognized nor valued, for instance, mentoring and tutoring students, activities related to course preparation or services, or other time-consuming activities that increased exponentially during the pandemic and were made more complicated by remote home-working (Carreri et al. 2023;

Górska et al. 2021). Many women, therefore, saw the time dedicated to their double role of care—both in the family and at university—increase during the pandemic (Altan-Olcay and Bergeron 2022; Docka-Filipek and Stone 2021; França et al. 2023).

The third widely explored theme was the impact of the pandemic on scientific productivity, which is a key factor in building an academic career. The studies highlight how during the first phase of the pandemic, for all disciplines, productivity (measured in terms of number of submissions and publications) decreased more for women compared to previous years or did not grow as much as it did for men, especially for women with children (Amano-Patiño et al. 2020; Andersen et al. 2020; Cui et al. 2021; Kibbe 2020; King and Frederickson 2021; Flaherty 2020; Squazzoni et al. 2021; Viglione 2020) and for women in the first stages of their academic careers (Amano-Patiño et al. 2020; Andersen et al. 2020; Vincent-Lamarre et al. 2020). A similar trend is apparent regarding the presentation of projects and fundraising activities (Gao et al. 2021; Kalpazidou Schmidt 2020). Conversely, some academic service activities that are undervalued but fundamental for the functioning of the scientific community, such as peer reviews, grew more for women than men (Squazzoni et al. 2021).

Also, based on these results, a distinct stream of studies developed focusing on what was known well before the pandemic as the "motherhood penalty"[1] (Lutter and Schröder 2019) when the experience of being an academic mother is compared to men and to women without care responsibilities (Kasymova et al. 2021; Minello 2020; Minello et al. 2021). The disadvantage to mothers (with small children) who work in universities is generally attributed to two factors: the first concerns the gender division of unpaid work within the home; and the second concerns the gender division of academic work mentioned above (Minello 2021). During the pandemic, mothers often had to postpone (until nighttime) or abandon more intellectual (and conceptual) work related to scientific research so that they could devote themselves (in addition to domestic work) to childcare, as well as to academic work but mostly in the form of teaching, student tutoring, and service activities. Furthermore, around this theme, a space has developed for the sharing of subjective experiences, for joint reflection, and for claiming a set of necessary changes within academic contexts (see, for example, Boncori 2020; Bowyer et al. 2021; Couch et al. 2021; Guy and Arthur 2020; Heath et al. 2022; Plotnikov et al. 2020). This is a space of auto-ethnographic and, in many cases, creative writing by academic mothers, which yields a detailed account of the micropolitics driving the reproduction of gender inequalities and sheds light on mechanisms that are often pre-existing but are not discussed in the typically male academic context described as a "care-free zone" (Lynch 2010).

Importantly, there is a final issue discussed in the scientific literature that concerns the policies and actions (not) adopted by universities, including those necessary to adequately respond to the disadvantages that the pandemic exacerbated for some groups, especially academic mothers (Gewin 2020; Malisch et al. 2020; Nash and Churchill 2020; Oleschuk 2020; Mickey et al. 2023). These studies, although small in number, highlight how universities, in such extraordinary times, often shirked their responsibility to ensure that academic staff with domestic and care tasks—largely female—could fully participate in academic work, interpreting work–family balance as an exclusively "private" matter (Nash and Churchill 2020).

It is notable how these studies invite us to shift our perspective and not only consider the disadvantages of mothers but also reflect on the choice to have, and especially not to have, children made by women wanting to pursue an academic career—especially if they have nontenured posts (Naldini et al. 2023)—and, therefore, to consider the existence of an implicit selection process (Gaiaschi 2022; Minello 2021). On the other hand, studies (implicitly) risk making all fathers fall within the model of "hegemonic masculinity" (França et al. 2023) and validating the assumption that the obstacle against achieving the "right" level of productivity—"business as usual"—in times of crisis consists (exclusively) of the care responsibilities that fall mainly on women (Corbera et al. 2020; Pereira

2021; Utoft 2020), pushing the role of family configurations and the partner's employment conditions into the background (Martucci 2023).

3. Intersectional Lenses and an Intracategorical Approach to Academic Work: Perspective and Categories

The intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1989) assumes that people have multiple and layered identities resulting from social relations, history, and power structures. Adopting this perspective allows us to grasp complexity by investigating how various factors (gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, and others) combine and create specific forms of interrelated discrimination. The intersectional perspective is the key to considering how various identity factors are interconnected on both individual and institutional/social/cultural levels (micro and macro levels) (Castro and Holvino 2016). Intersectionality underlines the complex inequalities generated within power relations, going beyond the analysis of any single category or even the mere sum of several categories (Cho et al. 2013; Collins 2000, 2015; Crenshaw 1989).

Intersectionality was theorized in the early 1990s by combining gender and racial factors (Crenshaw 1989), but since then, scholars have become more and more aware of the fact that two categories may not be enough to tackle social inequalities in societies (Lutz 2023). Many intersectionality scholars have advocated for the incorporation of other categories, such as nationality (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992), sexuality (McClintock 1995), and other markers of discrimination, such as class, age/generation, health, disability, and gender identity (Amelina and Lutz 2019). It is important to consider that identity categories are nonadditive and may acquire a (slightly) different meaning in different contexts. Which axes, demographic characteristics, or inequalities should be considered to select "particular social groups at neglected points of intersection" (McCall 2005, p. 1773) is, indeed, still the subject of academic debate.

Today, intersectionality is a well-established approach in feminist studies (Davis 2008; McCall 2005), but it is a concept that has gone far beyond gender studies and is adopted in many disciplinary fields of social sciences. For example, recent studies on organization have begun to adopt an intersectional perspective (Banerjee 2012; Holvino 2010; McBride et al. 2015) with the aim of analyzing the ways in which gender relates to other sources of inequality (Muzio and Tomlinson 2012). It can be said that intersectionality is, itself, the subject of reinterpretation, gradually including categories not initially considered, and has become a "buzzword": indeed, the term has the advantage of being open-ended and providing adaptability to diverse contexts (Davis 2008).

Intersectionality as a concept and analytical tool has generated heated debates within different disciplinary fields. The focus of intersectional approaches has also shifted to other "intersections", giving rise to new theories and holding together a variety of ways of understanding and approaching intersectionality (Cho et al. 2013). In this regard, it is useful to mention the distinction proposed by Nina Lykke (2010, spec. pp. 68–69) between (i) "explicit" theories of intersectionality that explicitly use the term introduced by Crenshaw; (ii) "implicit" theories of intersectionality that have explored the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and class, without the direct use of the word "intentionality" (including, for example, Black Feminism studies before the term was introduced); and (iii) theories of the intra-actions of social categories/structures that propose "other designations" to analyze complexity, including "interlocking systems of oppression" (Combahee River Collective 1977; Collins 1991), "axes of power" (Nira Yuval-Davis 2006), "interferences" (Moser 2006; Geerts and Van der Tuin 2013), "cosynthesis" (Kwan 2000), and "interdependencies" (Hornscheidt 2007).

Within this articulated methodological debate, Leslie McCall (2005) elaborates on the first method to apply intersectional theory in research. McCall (2005) believes that intersectionality represents "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (p. 1771), and in the article "The Complexity of Intersectionality", she describes three possible approaches on how to use the intersectional

lens. The different approaches depend on how social categories are treated: anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategorical.

Studies on "anti-categorical complexity" refer to the deconstruction of categories "as part and parcel of the deconstruction of inequality itself" (McCall 2005, p. 1777). According to this approach, categories are the result of an arbitrary social construction and do not represent the complexity of subjects and social structures. The proposal is to overcome the use of categories to target those social constructions that generate inequality (McCall 2005). McCall underlines that the anticategorical approach makes it possible to challenge a system of thought that considers identity categories in an univocal and rigid manner; at the same time, she recognizes the importance of using categories because the process of decategorization brings with it "political consequences" (Matsuda 1990, p. 1776). Categories make visible the complexity of social inequalities, and they emphasize the presence or absence of privileges with respect to their positioning in society.

Therefore, McCall proposes the second so-called intracategorical methodological approach: studies that critically use categories to investigate "minorities within minorities" (McCall 2005, p. 1780). The focus is on the production and reproduction of categories in social life to reveal the complexity of the experience of discrimination lived within each social group (McCall 2005). Intracategorical analysis examines groups or individuals, considering as many categories as possible (McCall 2005). McCall identifies qualitative research as the way to analyze individual specificity, particularly in case studies and semistructured interviews. Qualitative methods generally have the capability to investigate the complexity of society in order to represent its diversity and heterogeneity (Ragin 2000).

The last intercategorical approach focuses on "the nature of the relationships among social groups and, importantly, how they are changing" (McCall 2005, p. 1785). The aim is to consider the relationships between social groups and define what McCall calls the "configurations of inequality" (McCall 2005, p. 1789). The emphasis is on the transformations that occur within the relationships between groups rather than on the individual level. The corresponding methods are those of quantitative research: an empirical analysis of the multiple dimensions in which social categories are shaped in a comparative sense.

McCall's model takes up the challenge of "intersectionality, yes but how?" (Hvenegård Lassen and Staunæs 2020). Systematizing a complex approach such as intersectionality is difficult, and although models can be useful in many ways, they can also oversimplify (cf. Lutz and Amelina 2021b). With reference to McCall's proposal, each approach has its limitations and opportunities: the intercategorical approach takes into account three social categories—gender, class, and race—and explores their mutual interpenetration, but the categories are defined as "natural" and static; the intracategorical approach, on the other hand, takes into account the transformation processes of the categories, which are situated and change in space and time; and the anticategorical approach challenges the identity categories themselves, emphasizing the social constructions and simplifications that may result from them. Notwithstanding the potential and criticalities present in each approach, it is important to consider that it is difficult to separate the approaches clearly in a research process (Amelina 2021; Lutz and Amelina 2021a, 2021b), as well as to place oneself clearly and unequivocally within one of the three.

For this research, embracing an intersectional perspective means observing how gender intersects with other social categories to produce specific conditions of (dis)advantage for different groups within academia. Therefore, we will adopt an intracategorical approach while taking into account the methodological reflections made so far. Indeed, in this study, we consider how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the combination of gender, age, and class (career position) produced specific asymmetries in the academic context by bringing out the relationships between individual experiences, organizational cultures, and certain dimensions related to parenting models. Indeed, the choice of the three axes is connected to the existence of peculiar power relations in the academic field and how these intertwine with individual experiences. In academia, both in Italy and in Europe, significant gender disparities remain. Women have greater difficulties in career paths

(European Commission 2021), in gaining access to certain courses of study (such as STEM studies), and in being represented within academic governance (Checchi et al. 2018; Murgia and Poggio 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to make these processes visible through the lens of gender studies and to remember that gender combines with other identity factors in our specific research context, such as age. Age is defined here as the "individual life-course stage" and is the second axis of intersection that will be analyzed. Today, younger people working in Italian universities occupy precarious positions for longer than previous generations, and they are evaluated through a system based on performance and entrepreneurship (Gaiaschi 2021). At the same time, they are at a time of their life that may coincide with their desire for a family, which is often difficult to combine with job insecurity and new standards of academic productivity. The interaction between gender and the life-course stage gives rise to specific forms of asymmetry, which become more complex if class, understood as academic position, is also taken into account: occupying stable or precarious positions offers very different life prospects, possibilities, economic means, (in)stability, and (in)security, as we observe below. Recent reforms in the Italian university context have facilitated a process of the precarization of scientific careers, also driven by the frequent use of fixed-term contract forms and the associated job instability and by the continuing uncertainty in access to economic resources (Bellè et al. 2015). In Italy, those in precarious employment positions with a fixed-term contract may find themselves excluded from forms of protection and welfare and income support policies. In the European context, this situation is only present in Italy. "The absence of income support and/or continuity of income itself has the effect of reproducing inequalities based on social class of origin and/or the availability of one's own or one's family's resources, to be deployed during periods when one continues to do research even without a salary" (ibid., p. 68). A category of precarious researchers is also called the working poor, who have no or few protections in the present as well as in the future (if one thinks of retirement) and who find themselves in a very different position than the professors with whom they have a collaborative relationship, in terms of class, income, and life perspective (Coin et al. 2017).

4. Context, Data, and Method

4.1. The Italian Academic Context

In Italy, the problem of gender inequality in academia becomes evident after Ph.D. graduation, in the early stages of scientific careers (leaky pipeline and glass door phenomena), and much more so in the later stages (glass ceiling phenomenon). Since the mid-2000s, to address a serious financial crisis, Italy has progressively introduced reforms inspired by the New Public Management paradigm (Krüger et al. 2018). The Italian academic context has undergone profound changes and financial shortfalls as a result of three policies: the adoption of a new evaluation system for departments and universities, the so-called Gelmini Reform (Law No. 133/2008 and Law No. 169/2008), and cuts in public funds for universities and research, which have also affected academic staff turnover (Gaiaschi and Musumeci 2020). The first policy created the national evaluation system (VQR—Research Quality Assessment; "Departments of Excellence"). Currently, how the MIUR allocates funding to universities partially depends on the result of this evaluation (Gaiaschi and Musumeci 2020). The second reform enacted by Law No. 133/2008 concerned, in particular, the early stages of an academic career. The Law introduced two different kinds of fixed-term contracts: researcher A (RTDa: fixed-term researcher) and researcher B (RTDb: permanent researcher), replacing the indefinite-term researcher (RU) contract. This started a process of precarization of the early stages of the academic career path (Bozzon et al. 2015). The last measure reduced turnover in universities (which had characterized the period between 2007 and 2017) by not allowing universities to proceed autonomously with staff recruitment. This led to no replacement of retired lecturers with newly hired personnel (Gaiaschi and Musumeci 2020) and contributed to making university careers more difficult and slower (Guarnascio et al. 2023). Recent studies (Gaiaschi et al. 2018; Picardi 2019) underline how the combination of these three factors has had repercussions from a gender perspective, par-

ticularly in the selection processes in the early stages of the academic career path, especially for fixed-term researcher positions.

These transformations are part of a framework in which Italian universities are increasingly embracing a neoliberal conception of scientific productivity and its evaluation through certain parameters, such as competition (among researchers, departments, and universities) and accountability (Gaiaschi and Musumeci 2020; Poggio 2018b; De Coster and Zanoni 2019). It is important to note that this system is specific to Italian academia and is compounded by the fact that there is significant mobility between academic institutions within Italy.

4.2. Data and Method

Against this backdrop, the national research project GEA—Gendering Academia, which was funded by the Italian Ministry of Universities,[2] was aimed at investigating, from a gender perspective, the academic careers and working conditions of women and men doing research and teaching work in different career stages and disciplines in four Italian universities, with a focus on recent transformations in the university and the processes of recruitment. This article draws on qualitative data collected in GEA—Gendering Academia's project. More specifically, it is based on the analysis of 127 qualitative interviews with two groups of academics at different levels of their academic careers but who are not full professors (yet): postdocs and temporary researchers (Early Career academics (ECas)) and associate professors (Advanced Career academics (ACas)), working in both STEM and SSH academic departments in four Italian universities located in different parts of the country (two from the North and two from the South).

The sample was identified by its theoretical significance and included both women and men, both with children and without, for each department, disciplinary area, and career level, with the goal of maintaining heterogeneity in terms of age and academic seniority and including different career patterns of both men and women.

The ECa sample consisted of 32 men, half in SSH and half in STEM, and 32 women, including 11 fathers and 10 mothers, while the others had no children. The ages ranged from 27 to 46 (mean age 35). At the time of the interview, 30 participants were fixed-term researchers, 32 were research grant holders, and two were research fellowship holders and contract lecturers. (Some ECas also had contract lectureships.)

The interviews with ACas involved 31 female associate professors, 16 in SSH and 15 in STEM, and 32 male associate professors equally distributed between the two fields of study, aged 40 to 66 (with an average age of 49), including 19 women and as many men with children. The online semistructured qualitative interviews were conducted in the four Italian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Specifically, the interviews, which, on average, lasted 1 h and a half, were conducted online between May 2020 and May 2021, a year characterized in Italy not only by the first severe lockdown, which lasted almost two months, but also by various restrictive measures.[3] In March 2020, Italy was the first country in Europe to impose a nationwide COVID-19 lockdown. The law imposed an immediate suspension of all commercial and industrial activities, with the exception of "essential" sectors. These were economic activities that were considered essential to sustain citizens and support the economy during the pandemic. All businesses and institutions in other sectors could only remain active via remote working. Therefore, sports and cultural events were suspended, and schools and universities were closed. In addition, the government imposed travel stoppages and strong limitations on personal mobility. Several lockdowns were imposed, and in the fall of 2020, the management of the pandemic with its restrictions was differentiated from region to region according to the incidence of cases. In this context, remote work and distance learning remained a widespread form of work and organization in university. In spring 2021, vaccines became available, and the restrictions eased as a result.

The interview outline contained six sections: individual academic career, current daily working life and pandemic changes, organizational cultures (current and past), well-being

and work–life balance and pandemic changes, and perceptions of and satisfaction with their current position, future prospects, and policies. After having fully transcribed and anonymized the interviews (all names are pseudonyms), a thematic analysis was carried out in several steps following an iterative process, with the support of the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti 9. The analysis explored in depth the daily work life and work–life balance of both early and advanced career academics. In a second more interpretative phase, we sought to shed light on the intersections of three axes of diversity—gender, social class, and age—which were made more visible by the pandemic. In this phase, we identified three "conformations" that best embody the intersectionality of these axes as they show specific outcomes in terms of quality of working life, well-being, and potentially unequal long-term consequences for the careers of academics. Throughout the analysis process, the codes and their interrelations were discussed among the authors, and a continuous conversation was maintained between the coding and theoretical interpretations. The analysis revealed three household and family life course types that highlight the interlocking of the three axes producing specific conditions of (dis)advantage for some academics: living alone or with parents (32 interviewees), couples without children or with grown-up children, i.e., over 14 years old (52 interviewees), and couples with young children (under 14 years old) and other family members in need of care (43 interviewees).

In terms of disciplinary areas, both STEM and SSH staff started using more individualized ways of working, albeit with some differences. Those working in STEM had to interrupt their team experiments in the labs but without slowing down their publication activity. In fact, STEM staff used the time freed up by the lack of lab activity to develop papers, read data, and write new articles. With the reopening of labs in the later stages of the emergency, a new, precise division of tasks was developed that had to be performed individually to comply with the new health regulations and social distancing. In the SSH field, on the other hand, research activity was characterized by the fact that it was mainly carried out individually, even before the emergency, and what the interviewees lacked most was the exchange of ideas—even informally—between colleagues that normally took place in the organizations. Importantly, this discipline-based characterization does not differ between the three household and family life types we focus on below.

5. The Pandemic and the Interlocking of Gender, Class, and Age

5.1. Living Alone or with Parents during the Pandemic

Those interviewees who were at a stage in their life course with neither partner nor caregiving burdens for young children or older adults enacted an "*inhuman*" management model, where there was a (forced, in some respects) withdrawal from the sphere of private and social life. As Pino recounted, people entered "*another dimension*" that seemed suspended in time, alienated from the world, and in which social relations had been compromised.

> Social life has been greatly compromised, uhm. . . [. . .] so we are in a time in some ways of. . . of transition which has been going on for several months now, in which I must say we are also beginning to forget the type of life that we previously had [. . .] Now [during the pandemic] we've suddenly entered another dimension. So, more than anything else the work dimension has now shifted into private spaces, but it occupies spaces that in fact could not be devoted to anything else, if not the family dimension. . . All other relationships have been somehow compromised. (Pino, 56 years old, SSH field, ACa.)

In particular, during lockdowns, the pandemic seems to have generated for interviewees who lived alone or with their parents what were called "*empty times*" that were no longer devoted to social/private life and had to be "*filled*". Often, in these cases, regardless of gender, the strategy of overwork was adopted, in line with the organizational academic culture (Cannito et al. 2023), with the consequence of a complete invasion by work of what had become a single productive time–place.

> It was a tragedy [laughing] in the sense, I probably worked twice as hard, especially in the initial phase of the lockdown, but trivially because I didn't have anything else to do... So my time management changed because I could work calmly. I woke up later because I didn't have to catch the bus, and so on. I drank coffee, switched on the computer and started working at nine and finished at eleven in the evening, quietly. (Enzo, 31 years old, STEM field, ECa.)

> With the pandemic [time management] got worse because... obviously not being there, by anyone... then the days were all the same so I carried on working like this for weeks. (Erika, 40 years old, STEM field, ACa.)

In terms of social class, we note that this complete invasion by work and withdrawal of time for oneself takes on a different character in the experiences of early and precarious career academics and those in stable positions. Specifically, for the latter, the increase in work activities especially concerned highly demanding experimental distance teaching and more frequent online meetings related to governance, services, and "care" activities, which were more thematized by women, as shown in other research (Altan-Olcay and Bergeron 2022; Docka-Filipek and Stone 2021), with a consequent reduction of the time spent on research.

Importantly, the pandemic was described by several interviewees as a positive period to the extent that it allowed academics to "*gain time*" and be "*more productive*", demonstrating the extent to which the model of the "ideal academic" (Cannito et al. 2023; Lund 2015) was introjected. The "ideal academic" must be assertive, ambitious, and able to survive competition, characteristics traditionally associated with the hegemonic model of masculinity. In addition, the "ideal academic" is expected not to interrupt or slow down work commitments. Slowdowns are not only not contemplated, but when they do occur, they result in both reputational and career penalties (Cannito et al. 2023). In terms of social class, especially for those in early and precarious posts, working from home during the lockdowns freed up time for writing articles and projects, making it possible to enhance the components of academic work that are most valued individually—in terms of funds, prestige, and career entry—by neoliberal organizational cultures (Poggio 2018a) as well as Italian national scientific qualifications. While, on the one hand, the pandemic imposed various constraints on the performance of academic work (in terms, for example, of building important informal networks for ECas and teaching and building good relations with students, especially felt by ACas), on the other, paradoxically, it made it possible to deploy the model of the "ideal academic" more openly (Lund 2015). Furthermore, the analysis shows that, in the case of academics at the beginning of their careers and in particular for those with research grants, new teaching and tutoring activities that should have started were suspended or canceled due to the health emergency. Significantly, several respondents said they were relieved by the lack of these opportunities because the remote work would have taken up too much of their time and distracted them from their primary research objectives.

> This also has, let's say, a positive aspect... because the more time you have available, the more publications you can develop: therefore, basically... you are then able to pay more attention to publications, to take care of that phase. (Nicola, 35 years old, SSH field, ECa.)

> I had more time, it was great [laughs], I wrote more, I was more productive, absolutely positive. (Lia, 29 years old, SSH field, ECa.)

The "saving" of time (the "gain") was clearly felt by those interviewees who had interrupted their lives as commuters and by those who had suspended several personal activities, such as sport.

> Let's say that from this point of view things have improved, because being at home has made it possible to really optimize my time, because... Just think that I had to go to **** and stay there a week for lectures, but during this time I did them [lessons] from the comfort of my home... So from that point of view, Covid

> relieved me because I did all the lessons online then. (Barbara, 46 years old, SSH field, ECa.)

Interestingly, the analysis did not reveal significant differences between men and women. However, in focusing analytical attention on inequalities, not to be forgotten are those that were implicit in the texts collected and were socially invisible. Importantly, the pandemic, by giving unprecedented visibility to existing asymmetries and exacerbating them, caused some female interviewees, particularly those in terms of the class with nontenured and precarious posts, to reflect on whether to have and, above all, not to have a family in order to be able to continue their academic career. However, it was a nonchoice—i.e., the inability to imagine a family for oneself—as can be read in the next excerpt.

> I was just talking these days with some of my colleagues who have families, and it was devastating. It has been devastating to have to go home with Covid, because they are in fact the ones who have to carry the load. . . So I feel privileged precisely for not having to carry that load on top of what I already do. It's probably also a dog biting its own tail, in the sense, I can't imagine having a family in the immediate future, because I realize that there is no room in my life for even a seedling. (Giusy, 29 years old, SSH field, ECa.)

5.2. Living in a Couple without Children or with Grown-Up Children

As in the case of the previous household type, the interviews with those who were at a stage in their life course with a cohabiting partner but without caregiving burdens showed a strong culture of hyperwork, without distinction of gender and both in the STEM and in SSH. Compared to those living alone, however, we did not find a feeling of being completely absorbed in the work sphere and alienated from the social world. The interviewees worked long hours, but they did so while reconciling this with their private lives. As Francesca, an associate professor in the STEM field, said: "*We worked a lot, but we worked well*". This was especially true of those whose family circumstances allowed them to have a good degree of control over their space–time: firstly, those who had no one that partly or wholly depended on them; secondly, the members of couples who worked at university or professionals who worked remotely in a spacious house, a condition that advanced career academics, in particular, were able to take advantage of as it is related to social class. Associate professors, being financially well off and having large houses with several rooms to work in, represented a particularly advantaged group in our sample. In the experience of Harry, an associate professor with two grown-up children, with the pandemic, the management of workplace–times was "*easier*, *much easier: just change rooms and change clothes*". Likewise, Ignazio, a member of a childfree couple, said:

> Fortunately, we could give lectures in two separate rooms, and from this point of view we didn't get in each other's way. . . Living as a couple, each of us with a computer in two different rooms, we could. . . we had the space. (Ignazio, 58 years old, STEM field, ACa.)

Surprisingly, the lockdown also had positive effects on private and family life. On the personal side, the period of confinement was seen by some interviewees as beneficial because it freed up time and expanded "space for yourself", especially for early career academics without teaching duties. For example, Patrizia, an early careerist in the STEM area, said that with the closure of the laboratories she had rediscovered her personal life.

> Paradoxically, with the pandemic I've rediscovered, let's say, I haven't rediscovered but I've managed to carve out, some space for myself, for my personal/private life. . . which I wasn't able to do before, I wasn't able to have, because spending the whole day in the laboratory I couldn't carve out that space for myself, because even if you take a break in the laboratory you still don't do, you don't do activities that aren't part to your professional activity. (Patrizia, 34 years old, STEM field, ECa.)

As regards family life, for several interviewees, the lockdown resulted in a pleasant (re)cohabitation. For example, Carmine, an early careerist with a child on the way, said that, for him, COVID-19 was "a godsend" that had brought him a better quality of life–work conciliation because he could share the months of his partner's first pregnancy. On the other hand, Harry, an advanced careerist, said that he had "rediscovered his children" during the lockdown:

> Well, I've rediscovered my children, who I used to see very little. Among other things my daughter had just returned from an Erasmus exchange in Paris, and I hadn't seen her for six months. I mean, I'd gone to see her once. Then... we never said much at home, for so many years, we'd all been at home... Luckily we have a big house so there was no... A very connected big house and we have several computers, so there wasn't even the problem of say everybody in the same room and... everybody without connection or anything like that. It was never a problem thankfully. (Harry, 55 years old, SSH field, ACa.)

Positive experiences were also recounted by all the couples without children and with additional housing and online resources, a socially class-dependent condition. This was the case for Stella, who had decided to spend the lockdown period in her parents' house outside the city. When asked about the repercussions of COVID-19 on her work–life balance, she replied:

> No, it's gone well. We've moved in with my parents, who have a house in the countryside. So the pandemic immediately became more liveable, and I have a dedicated room as if it were my studio. I have everything I need to work, a big screen, a printer... For me it's been easier compared to staying at home, let's say. The four of us divide the work in a different way and then we keep each other company. (Stella, 48 years old, SSH field, ACa.)

It was observed that women were more likely than men to thematize an activity and participate in mental reflection, which was necessary to redefine the boundaries between professional life and private life, as shown in other studies (Carreri and Dordoni 2020). Moreover, domestic work—which, for many interviewees, especially of a higher social class, had been outsourced before the pandemic—ended up falling disproportionately on the shoulders of women, thus generating the "double presence" described during the 1970s by Balbo (1978), and which is still a very topical and useful metaphor with which to represent the unprecedented overlap between work and the private/family sphere. However, it emerged from the analysis that for women who now had grown-up children and more "egalitarian" husbands, the reorganization of routine had not produced a further imbalance in life–work conciliation compared to the previous period. For example, Lena, an advanced career academic with two older but not yet adult children, had been forced by the lockdown to reduce the time that she allocated to rest and leisure because, unlike those at an early career stage, she had many online teaching commitments and meetings, but thanks to her husband's support, she had not seen an increase in domestic and care work.

> Yes, [the lockdown] has greatly reduced rest times, because as I said, online teaching, especially in the past semester, has absorbed me a great deal... However, our home has been reorganized, in the sense that, because my husband is at home, many of the care tasks and cleaning chores, and so on, have been taken on by him. I must say it has obviously had an impact on the overall management... It hasn't had a heavy psychological impact, not nearly as heavy as in cases with younger children, in smaller homes. But for rest time... and free time, too, they have closed the gym to me [said ironically]. (Lena, 51 years old, SSH field, ACa.)

5.3. Living with Young Children and Other Family Members in Need of Care

Those interviewees who lived with young children encountered greater reconciliation difficulties in home-working during lockdown. The closure of services and schools meant,

especially for mothers, a complete overlap between work and the management of everyday life, without it being possible to count on grandparents, who are an essential resource in the Italian welfare system for the care of children (especially if young and of school age). As underlined by some research studies on how the children and family care burden was redistributed during the pandemic (Del Boca et al. 2020; Kulic et al. 2020; Naldini 2021), our analysis also highlighted logistical, physical, emotional, and intellectual difficulties in balancing work and family; difficulties perceived as more penalizing in terms of career for women compared to their male colleagues in the same professional position and with the same family circumstances.

> I've realized in this Covid period what it means to be a woman or to be a man in a job like mine. I've seen my male colleagues who were delighted to give their lectures online because they could stay there [home], do their stuff, without anyone hassling them. But I, on the other hand, was lost behind my daughter's home-schooling. So. . . I'd planned these spring months to do a whole series of things. Instead, I'm here [at home] and still have to try to manage these things. (Elvira, 51 years old, STEM field, ECa.)

The difficulties mainly affected mothers with several young children. For example, Nora, a mother of three children (11, 9, and 3 years old), represented the different day at Mom and Dad's house:

> Now, I have to try to carve out time and devote it to work with a basis of concentration where every ten minutes someone comes and asks me something, including guilt at the time when one treats one's children badly because they were trying to focus on something, and you have to live with that I think. . . The change is radical on moms, on women, because a dad who works from home stays locked in his room and works; the mom who works from home is not like that. . . So the gender difference is there objectively. (Nora, 38 years old, STEM field, ECa.)

They felt tired, could not sleep, and experienced stress and, sometimes, confusion about space–time boundaries (Carreri and Dordoni 2020). They said that they "produced" (published) less or nothing, and when they were able to do so, it was with extreme suffering and, in the long run, with possible effects on their careers. Hence, a gap—that of the "motherhood penalty"—opened up within the same group of women, between those who were childfree (and adhered in some way to the neoliberal model) and those who had care responsibilities (and tried to embrace the neoliberal model but in a partial way). Like the findings in other studies (Kasymova et al. 2021), this gap is a subject of reflection only for mothers and some childless women.

Importantly, the pandemic exposed women with young children to higher "social costs" and may have also caused them to have second thoughts about their work aspirations and made the possibility of postponing, if not giving up, a career seem more appealing. Sofia (with one daughter aged 4 and a husband who was a freelance professional) became an associate professor in 2019, in addition to undertaking research as a freelance professional. Before the pandemic, she commuted between a city in central Italy and one in the North where her university was located. As she did not have the support of either parents or in-laws, she recounted a prepandemic life consisting of working at weekends and during holidays and antisocial hours until midnight/1 am so that she could devote around three hours (from 6 to 9 pm) to her daughter. Her "balance" was upset by the COVID-19 crisis. During the pandemic, she had to halt all her research activities so much that she was thinking of not participating in the round of National Scientific Habilitation (ASN) as a full professor. She noted the presence of very strong differences with respect to her male colleagues, who, instead, had increased their research activities and number of publications.

> The situation at the beginning [of the pandemic] was almost, let's say, I don't know how to define it, maybe nightmarish, because my little girl was at home for

> all those months, for about three months... All my work froze, from projects to monographs—everything froze. I would have liked to participate, because I was finishing the monograph, at the National Scientific Habilitation... when it closed down, therefore before the definitive lockdown... already in the period between 20th February and 9th March. In those two weeks I did nothing and above all I threw in the towel on completing the monograph and reluctantly abandoned, after so much work, the idea of submitting an application to the National Scientific Habilitation... All my activities stopped. That is, I only continued with teaching—online teaching, which started immediately... but I did no research... My little girl took up all my time. But I saw instead that the lockdown had absolutely no repercussions on men. In fact my male colleagues during the lockdown, it is not that they finished [their own] book, they really wrote it from scratch, because the time, that is, having all that time available, for those who do research locked in the house is the optimum, it is the ideal, what we all dream of... I have many male colleagues, also with children, who have finished some works, started others, published. But this is not possible for a woman.
>
> (Sofia, 41 years old, SSH field, ACa.)

While we find the "motherhood penalty" regardless of social class, it must be said that for those in unstable and precarious posts, given the high competition and limited opportunities for entry into academic careers, the social cost is harsher, and these second thoughts take on the appearance of true quitting. Franca, for example, felt she was playing an unfair game with her peer group and had, therefore, made several sacrifices so as not to slow down too much and still fulfill the expectations of her mentor. All considered, she was also backtracking on the idea of pursuing an academic career.

> Now, during Covid, I set my alarm clock for four in the morning because I have to get on with the book I want to finish, and I work until one, eh... this is every day... I want to finish this book and I don't know how to find the time... In fact, I have to say that during this quarantine I had some moments of severe discouragement eh, because it has, in my opinion, widened the gap a lot. In the sense that my unmarried peers, that is, I felt that the amount of what they were writing was the incredible, right? You're locked in your home with your mom cooking you food...and so on. It's time you wrote anything at all... And I'm here having to navigate the teaching of my children, because there's that too! (Franca, 35 years old, SSH field, ECa.)

We found an emphasis on the individual responsibility of mothers in academia for both their "successes" and their "failures". In the case of men, however, the picture is more mixed. We found a group consisting of the more "innovative" fathers, those directly involved in care work, or those more sensitive to the issue of reconciling family and work. For example, Mario, whose wife was a pharmacist (and, therefore, an essential worker), stayed at home with his 6-year-old son. He said: "*I managed*". Raffaele, 40, alternated with his wife, "*even if she did more*". Mimmo, with one 2-year-old son and awaiting a second child, posed interesting reflections on the redefinition of life–time borders following the pandemic.

> The first day with my son, I have this distinct memory of me [laughter], while my wife was trying to recover from the caesarean, dead tired, I was sleeping with the baby in my arms and on the other side my cell phone to reply to emails so... obviously no one was forcing me to stay at the emails on that day, but in the meantime I was there. (Mimmo, 33 years old, SSH field, ECa.)

Within this somewhat heterogeneous frame of fatherhood, also apparent was that of the "naturalization" of gender roles. Leo, who had a 2-year-old daughter, said in regard to possibly different difficulties affecting mothers and fathers and coherently with the culture of parenthood prevalent, above all, in the first years of children's lives that:

> There are also moments in the growth of a person in which the role of a father and the role of the mother, without necessarily having to belittle one or value the other, may be somewhat different, but not because one it is more important, one is less important, but because while I was growing up, there was a moment in which I was looking for my mother. And I see that my daughter does so as well, and so yes, sometimes there is a representation certainly with some stereotypes that are a bit eh... particular, however, it doesn't mean that an aspect is devalued or exalted, it's part of a period of life. (Leo, 33 years old, SSH field, ECa.)

There was also a group of fathers, more like the group of mothers, who recognized the negative impact of parenthood on productivity and spoke of the pleasure of being able to reinvent oneself and devote time to fatherhood:

> Covid impact has had its own meaning because of course having the baby at home since February, my wife and I have taken turns. A bit we have used the babysitter in the latest period [of Covid], obviously not in the initial one, when there were no grandparents, no babysitter. Nobody, so we—I have to say her more than me—but we accordingly managed... our times. We were dad and mom [laughing]. (Raffaele, 40 years old, SSH field, ECa.)

Then, there were those interviewees, especially women, at a stage in their life course where they had to take care of nonself-sufficient family members and decide how and where to pass the lockdown, who, to not fail in this responsibility, had to leave their partner in another city:

> I returned to **** for my father, because, I mean, between the two [the partner and the father], I necessarily had to choose my father... Last year my father had a cerebral haemorrhage despite being well, but again... one thing is the possibility of, in four hours, two hours going back to **** and managing it, in short, one thing is instead... a perspective that we used to see... At that moment there was a lot of fear... so my father was left alone without... at first the cafés and bars were still open, but then I thought that that would be an activity again, that is... I saw the film in advance... and I said if they close it to him... there is no caregiver [meaning the law that allowed family caregivers to move] because he is self-sufficient. So between my partner, I chose my father. (Pia, 48 years old, STEM field, ACa.)

6. Discussion

Through an intracategorical intersectional analysis (McCall 2005) of a large volume of qualitative data about the working lives of academics during the COVID-19 pandemic, in this article, we have attempted to complexify the analysis by shifting the focus to other axes in addition to the more commonly used ones of gender and motherhood and including class (career position) and age (individuals' life-course stage). In so doing, we found that even if more generally the COVID-19 pandemic imposed new constraints on academic work by restricting the opportunities for face-to-face encounters and requiring a large amount of time to learn online teaching methods, the unprecedented experience of the pandemic also laid the bases—to different extents according to gender, class, and individuals' life-course stage—for adherence to the model of the "ideal academic" (Cannito et al. 2023; Lund 2015); a model that entails working nonstop and without a timetable in order to increase scientific output. By focusing on the various components of academic work, this article shows how working and life activities were redefined during the pandemic, especially the lockdowns, thus producing "unprecedented" uses and abuses of time, meaning, for example, more hours devoted to teaching and online meetings, particularly for advanced career academics but also opportunities related to the use of time because remote working made it possible to "free up time for oneself" for those living in couples without caring responsibilities and "optimize time"/"gain time" in the experiences of some subjects, i.e., men and women

alike who lived alone or with their parents, for whom the home became a single productive time–place.

Moreover, since our qualitative analysis did not take the three axes individually but brought out the subjective experiences at neglected multiple points of intersection, it confirms the "motherhood penalty" found in other research (e.g., Minello 2020) and highlights different nuances of the phenomenon. The penalty in terms of work–life balance and scientific productivity regarded, above all, women with young children and daughters taking care of their elderly parents, while those who lived alone or with parents, as well as those who lived in a couple with adult children or without caring responsibilities, had very little to reconcile. Not only are gender and age (individuals' life-course stage) relevant, but class (career position) is too as it exposes people differently to the neoliberal culture of productivity and competition and to distinct work commitments. Whereas in the case of advanced career academics (professors), we observed that the pandemic forced women with caring responsibilities to postpone research in order to devote themselves to other aspects of academic work (mainly teaching and service work), for those in unstable and precarious posts, we observed that the difficulties of being as productive as the peer group and meeting the expectations of scientific mentors made young mothers consider quitting their careers.

Importantly, the disadvantage in terms of career progress for women with care responsibilities emerged not only with respect to male and female colleagues who did not have such responsibilities but also with respect to the group of fathers. The analysis found that the group of fathers was more heterogeneous in terms of the impact of the lockdown on work: only some of the fathers recounted difficulties of work–life conciliation.

The intersectional approach allowed us to show the complexity of the phenomenon and a great heterogeneity of experiences. In this regard, surprisingly, there are also those who derived various advantages from the reorganization of work during the pandemic and reaped various emotional benefits. The analysis shows that both men and women who were at a stage in their life course with a cohabiting partner but without caring responsibilities reported positive experiences of work–life balance, especially those whose living conditions allowed them to have good control over their own space–time, a condition that—as related to social class—advanced-career academics were especially able to take advantage of.

7. Conclusions

In a context characterized by strong gender asymmetries, even before the COVID-19 outbreak, this article on the pandemic period and the academic world in Italy shows, firstly, how in the field of gender equality, there is always a risk of backlash because progress along one line (e.g., a reduction in the imbalance in top positions) can be accompanied by regressive phenomena. Secondly, this research suggests that in order to capture such regressive phenomena on the path to gender equality, it makes sense to complexify the analysis and capture the diversity of lived experiences through the interlocking of the gender dimension with other axes, in particular, social class and age. As we detailed in the previous section, the lived experiences were very different. In several cases, both men and women with certain characteristics were able to "benefit" from the pandemic by working nonstop and adhering to the model of the "ideal academic", potentially leading to faster career advancement. Importantly, we show that the phenomenon of regression did not affect all women equally and led to different outcomes, from physical/mental exhaustion and consideration of slowing career progression among associate professors to the hypothesis of abandoning an academic career or giving up building a family among younger women in the early and precarious stages of their careers. Social class also played a role as it facilitated work–life balance and well-being at work, except for respondents who had young children, especially mothers. However, a limitation of this study is that we cannot observe the concrete consequences of this diversity in terms of individuals' academic productivity, career progression, and life choices. We think it is important for

future research to address these issues by conducting longitudinal studies that examine academic workers over time and at multiple points in time.

In policy terms, to reduce gender inequalities, this study recommends that along with some structural actions (e.g., relieving those with caregiving burdens through teaching assistants or through a babysitting bonus or extra research funds), there is much room for cultural action. First of all, university organizations should act on that "*inhuman*" model of the "ideal academic" to make it more sustainable in terms of quality of working life and work–life balance. Secondly, to erode the association between women and care work, which relegates and overburdens them to their private life, it is important to revalorize and repoliticize care work, making it more visible, even within organizations, for example, in the forms of campaigning for the recognition of so-called "academic domestic work". At the same time, in order to avoid the risk of the "motherhood penalty" and reproducing the division of gender roles in academia and society, cultural measures that de-essentialize care as feminine and discuss care work as a right and duty for all, including men, are also needed (e.g., through a campaign to promote the involvement of fathers).

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Notes

1 We are using the term "motherhood penalty" broadly, including reductions in working time, as a substantial part of the literature does in contrast with the narrower focus on wage penalties examined by Budig and England (2001) and other researchers.

2 We acknowledge GeA project (GEndering Academia) funded by MIUR (the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research). Grant Number Prot. 2017REPXXS.

3 Distance learning, especially, in the case of children attending primary school, which had relevant effects on parents' working time, was used in Italy, though to varying degrees in different regions, during COVID-19 2020–2021 for at least 5 months on average (Eurydice 2022).

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The Gendered Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Employment in Argentina: The Mediating Role of the Public vs. Private Sectors

Yasmin A. Mertehikian * and Emilio A. Parrado

Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6299, USA; eparrado@pop.upenn.edu
* Correspondence: myasmin@sas.upenn.edu

Abstract: This study examines the COVID-19 pandemic's immediate and long-term impact on Argentina's labor market with a focus on gender disparities and the mediating role of the public vs. private sectors. Using household survey data, we assess men and women's employment trends before, during, and after the pandemic. Our findings reveal gender-specific recovery patterns that interact with the employment sector. The most prominent short-term effect of the pandemic was a dramatic increase in inactivity for both men and women. However, men recovered their level of labor force participation sooner than women, and one of the mechanisms behind this disparity was sector employment. While men predominantly benefitted from quicker reintegration in both the formal and informal private sectors, women leaned toward the public sector for stability during and after the pandemic. The heightened feminization of public sector employment is a further indication that the sector is critical for sustaining women's employment and promoting gender equity in the labor market.

Keywords: COVID-19; Argentina; gender; work; public sector; private sector

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted governments around the world to implement quarantine and social distancing measures in an effort to stop its spread. However, these measures were associated with reduced economic activity and, consequently, led to a severe economic crisis on a global scale. Millions faced unemployment, curtailed working hours, or were forcibly ousted from the workforce (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2021; Richter 2021). Latin America was among the regions most detrimentally impacted by the pandemic's economic fallout. The economic contraction witnessed in the region surpassed that of both advanced and emerging economies (Arreaza et al. 2021). Within Latin America, the most precipitous declines in economic activity were recorded in Panama (−18%), Peru (−11%), and Argentina (−9.9%) (Arreaza et al. 2021). These drops in economic activity were larger than those observed in developed countries like the United States, where the GDP fell by 9% during the first months of the pandemic (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2024).

The pandemic's effects have not been homogeneous across social and demographic groups. Numerous studies have revealed that women suffered more in terms of employment, hours of work, income, and labor force participation compared to men (e.g., Collins et al. 2021; Hipp and Bünning 2021; Mertehikian and Gonalons-Pons 2022; Reichelt et al. 2021). Women also faced an uptick in child caregiving burdens (e.g., Dunatchik et al. 2021; Farré et al. 2020; Manzo and Minello 2020; Zamarro and Prados 2021). In Latin America, the pandemic's adverse impact on women's employment was compounded by their overrepresentation in informal employment (e.g., Ameijeiras et al. 2021; Arreaza et al. 2021; Batthyány and Sánchez 2020; Bergallo et al. 2021; Ernst and López Mourelo

2020; Gutiérrez et al. 2020). Specifically, in Argentina, while both men and women initially faced increased inactivity due to the pandemic, men rebounded faster a year later, whereas women, especially the younger and less educated, remained disproportionately affected (Mertehikian and Parrado 2024).

How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect different employment sectors in Argentina? How did these changes vary across genders? Our study aims to answer these questions by examining the roles of the public and private sectors in Argentina's labor market during and after the pandemic, with a focus on gender differences. While substantial empirical evidence has shown the pandemic's gendered impact on employment, the extent of sectoral shifts within the labor market remains underexplored. Few studies differentiate the roles of the public and private sectors during and after the pandemic. Ameijeiras et al. (2021) documented that women in Argentina moved from informal roles to the public sector more than men. However, they did not assess short- and longer-term effects, as well as the dynamics of employment transitions.

Differentiating between the roles of the public and private sectors as employers is pivotal in the context of Latin American labor markets. Historically, public employment has been leveraged by governments in the region as a tool to mitigate the adverse impact of frequent economic crises. The public sector is a significant employment source in Latin America, especially for women. Its share in salaried employment has increased in recent decades, particularly since the 2000s, and especially in South America (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) et al. 2013; Gasparini et al. 2015). The public sector has played a crucial role in creating jobs during recessive periods, acting as a buffer against soaring unemployment and inactivity rates that could have been even more pronounced (Fernández and González 2020; Marshall 1990). Latin American governments have historically achieved this either through the direct creation of new public jobs—temporary or permanent—or by retaining existing positions (Farné 2016; Marshall 1990).

Argentina presents an intriguing case for two main reasons. Firstly, the country, akin to Venezuela, has seen a rise in public employment over recent decades, accounting for nearly 20% of total jobs during the 2010s—significantly above the regional average of about 12% (Diéguez and Gasparin 2016; Fernández and González 2020; Gasparini et al. 2015; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2016, 2020). Secondly, there is a discernible gendered trend in employment across Latin America and distinctly in Argentina. Women have become predominantly employed in the public sector, particularly in roles deemed traditionally "female", such as public health and education, while men dominate the private sector (Dávila 2008; Gasparini et al. 2015; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2016, 2020). Indeed, over 50% of women in Argentina are employed within the public sector (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2016, 2020).

We argue that a more complete account of the gendered impact of the pandemic on employment needs to differentiate between the roles of the public and private sectors as well as short- and longer-term effects. Our results show that while the pandemic initially affected men and women similarly, men recovered their level of labor force participation sooner than women. One of the mechanisms behind the disparity was sector employment. Informal private employment declined similarly for both genders immediately because of the pandemic. However, while informal sector employment recovered for men, that was not the case for women. Not only did women face greater difficulties in returning to informal employment, but they actually continued to transition out of informality and into inactivity well into the pandemic. Similar gender differences were evident for formal employment in the private sector. By contrast, only public formal employment showed no gender differences in the degree of protection afforded to workers. More interesting, the expansion of formal sector employment to respond primarily to the health needs of the Argentine population further attracted women into public formal employment. Therefore, while the private sector reactivated men's employment, the public sector has been central in reactivating women's employment.

2. Context

2.1. The Political Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Argentina

As with many nations globally after the COVID-19 outbreak, Argentina enacted measures to control and stop virus spread and mitigate labor market consequences. In March 2020, it imposed Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation (PMSI) (Castagna et al. 2021). PMSI entailed a complete shutdown of non-essential activities, followed by a gradual, activity-based reopening (Mera et al. 2021). The most severe restrictions occurred from March to October 2020, representing the pandemic's peak impact on Argentina's labor market. Subsequently, most economic activities resumed and mobility restrictions were lifted, returning the country to a certain pre-pandemic normality by early 2021. The educational system was an exception to this pattern. Argentina, like other countries in the region, closed its schools from 16 March 2020 until around mid-February 2021, although there were variations in school reopenings throughout 2021 according to the epidemiological situation of the country and of each region (Arnold et al. 2021; Matovich and Bucciarelli 2021; Rodríguez 2021; Ruiz and Cornaglia 2023; Schwal 2022; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) 2021). Only by the end of September 2021 did classes resume fully in person (Ruiz and Cornaglia 2023). This placed Argentina eighth in the world and second in South America in terms of the number of weeks that schools were closed (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2021, cited in Ruiz and Cornaglia 2023, p. 2). School closings had a direct impact on women with children, as they faced increased challenges in managing both work and family responsibilities (Arza 2020; Passerino and Trupa 2020; Wigdor and Bonavitta 2021).

Argentina went through the COVID-19 pandemic amid the government of Alberto Fernández, who was part of *Kirchnerism*. *Kirchnerism* is a political movement that emerged in Argentina after the 2001 crisis and a left-wing faction within the Peronist party in the country. The Kirchner administrations ruled the country from 2003 to 2015 and from 2019 to 2023. These administrations showed clear statist leaning—that is, they were governments in which the state had a predominant role in the economy. This was reflected both in greater market regulations as well as the consequent expansion of public employment (Calvo and Murillo 2012). Such ideology explains the policy responses adopted to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, particularly in economic terms. Indeed, public health measures coincided with policies aimed at protecting employment and vulnerable workers. Drawing from Mera et al. (2021) and Ernst and López Mourelo (2020), government initiatives can be separated by whether they are oriented toward the protection of formal or informal workers. Policies oriented toward the informal sector focused on replacing lost labor income with government subsidies for unemployed or low-income workers. Initially, the government expanded existing programs like the Universal Child Allowance (AUH, due to its acronym in Spanish[1]) and the Universal Pregnancy Allowance (AUE, in Spanish) while introducing emergency programs. The Emergency Family Income (IFE, for its acronym in Spanish), created in April 2020, provided payments equal to 60% of the minimum wage to eligible individuals based on their employment status or income. These programs continued but were adjusted as the labor market evolved.

Formal sector measures were oriented toward protecting jobs during the pandemic. From March 2020 to December 2021, the government prohibited dismissals and suspensions. Financial assistance compensated employers for salaries of all formal employees in companies with up to 100 workers as well as healthcare workers. The Emergency Assistance Program for Work and Production (ATP, due to its acronym in Spanish) supported companies in salary payments. This program ended in late 2020, replaced by the Productive Recovery Program (REPRO, in Spanish) for companies with declining revenues. The government also reduced employer contributions to social security for severely affected companies and deferred consumption tax (VAT) payments for small and medium-sized enterprises. As economic recovery advanced, these policies were gradually cut down.

2.2. Female Labor Force Participation and Public Employment in Argentina

Gender differences in the short- and longer-term impacts of the pandemic and their interactions with employment were also grounded in the particular characteristics of women's work in Argentina, and Latin America more generally. Over the past decades, Argentina has witnessed growing participation of women in the labor force. The pattern mimics the trends for Latin America. For the region as a whole, women's labor force participation increased from 20% in the 1960s to 65% in the pre-pandemic period (Frisancho et al. 2023; Marchionni et al. 2019). Argentina, in turn, experienced a nearly 22 percent point increase (from 26.5% to 48.1%) between 1970 and 2017 (Manzano 2015; Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social 2017). These changes were highly significant for reducing gender disparities in economic resources. The expansion of female employment reduced the gender gap in labor force participation from 54.1 to 22.4 percentage points during the same period (Manzano 2015; Observatorio de la Violencia contra las Mujeres 2018). By 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, women's activity rate in Argentina was 49.2%, while men's was 70.2% (Rulli 2020).

This rise in female labor force participation coincided with the growth of public sector employment in both the region and the country. Public employment has historically served as a buffer against unemployment during crises and as a cushion against insufficient private sector job creation (Farné 2016; Fernández and González 2020; Marshall 1990). The role of public employment has been especially critical in Latin America, where economic crises are frequent. During the period spanning from 2012 to 2014, 12% of the employed population reported working in the public sector in the region (Gasparini et al. 2015; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2016). This percentage remained stable through 2018 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2020), despite a considerable increase in the number of public employees since 2000—which in the case of Argentina was nearly 70% (Diéguez and Gasparin 2016). Argentina stands out in the region concerning public employment, as public employment's share of the labor market reached almost 20% in 2014 (Diéguez and Gasparin 2016; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2016), and the significant public sector representation remained until 2018 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2020). Furthermore, Argentina is one of four countries in the region that showed an increase in the share of public employment in total employment from 2011 to 2018 (from 16.2% to 17.2%) (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2020). This increase took place particularly in the context of *Kirchnerist* governments, for which public sector employment was not only part of their core ideology in economic terms but also constituted a way of reaching their constituencies (Calvo and Murillo 2012).

The growth of the public sector though is highly gendered. Like the general trend in the region (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2020) and in more developed countries (Gornick and Jacobs 1998; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2016, 2020; Schmidt 1993, cited in Gornick and Jacobs 1998, p. 688), women in Argentina are overrepresented among public sector workers (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2016, 2020; Secretaría de Gestión y Empleo Público de la Nación 2022). This is because the public sector tends to employ more women than men, especially in occupations traditionally considered "female", such as public education and health services. It also offers better conditions than the private sector for women balancing work and family obligations (Dávila 2008; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2016, 2020). The latter became more evident in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when public sector employment—except in the case of the health sector—allowed for remote working, providing more job stability and security for women.

Currently, over half of public sector employees in Latin America are women (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2020). This contrasts with the private sector, in which men's labor force participation significantly exceeds that of women (Dávila 2008; Gasparini et al. 2015). As Gasparini et al. (2015) noted, women's greater par-

ticipation in public sector employment occurs in a context in which men are experiencing a decline in this sector. This decrease, driven by growing female labor force participation in the region, has also occurred in the private sector, albeit to a lesser extent. While the proportion of men in public employment fell by 10 percentage points between 1992 and 2012, the private sector saw only a 5-point decline (Gasparini et al. 2015, p. 757). However, the importance of the public sector as a source of employment for women becomes more evident when analyzing its influence on women's employment rates. In 2011, 17% of employed women in Latin America were salaried employees in the public sector, compared to 10.3% of men; in Argentina, this was even more pronounced, with 22.5% of women being salaried employees in the public sector for the same year (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) et al. 2013, p. 47).

Together, the trends in gender differences in public and private sector employment as well as the policy responses to the pandemic underscore clear interactions between gender, the employment sector, and the varying duration of the pandemic's impact on employment.

3. Data and Methods

We investigated these interactions using cross-sectional and panel data from nine waves of the Argentine household survey (*Encuesta Permanente de Hogares de Argentina*, EPH). The data spanned from the fourth quarter of 2019 to the fourth quarter of 2021. These quarters encompassed pre-pandemic conditions (Q4 2019 and Q1 2020), the immediate aftermath of the pandemic outbreak (Q2, Q3, and Q4 of 2020 as the short term), and the subsequent economic recovery period one and a half years post-outbreak (all of 2021 as a longer-term perspective). Data from the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INDEC, for its acronym in Spanish) indeed showed this trend: while Argentina was already under an economic recession during the first quarter of 2020, the second quarter of that year represented a disastrous contraction with a decline in the GPD of almost 15.8% compared to the previous quarter (INDEC 2021a). It was only by the first quarter of 2021 that the national GDP saw a positive net growth in comparison to the year before (of almost 2.9%) (INDEC 2021b). The transition from the third quarter of 2021 to the fourth quarter of that year, moreover, picked up those still left behind by the economic recovery. The EPH is a household survey offering quarterly data, based on a stratified probabilistic sample from 32 urban centers in Argentina with 100,000 or more inhabitants. The EPH follows a 2-2-2 scheme, wherein households within an area are surveyed for two consecutive quarters, then omitted for the next two quarters, and finally surveyed again for another two consecutive quarters. This design facilitates both cross-sectional analysis and tracking individual labor transitions longitudinally across quarters.

We limited our sample to individuals aged 18 to 64 at the time of the survey to capture the primary working age population. The dependent variable categorized respondents into six mutually exclusive employment statuses: out of the labor force, employed in the informal private sector, employed in the public formal sector, employed in the private formal sector, unemployed, and self-employed. Informal employment was defined, in line with Argentina's National Institute of Statistics and Census, as salaried workers without pension contributions.[2] To distinguish whether a respondent was employed in the public or private sector, we relied on their response to the survey question about the nature (state-owned or private) of the institution/business where they worked most weekly hours.

Gender was a central dimension framing this analysis, and the results are presented separately for men and women. For the cross-sectional assessment, we conducted *t*-tests for each employment status to test gender differences in the percentages of men and women in each occupational status across quarters, taking the first quarter of 2020 as the reference period. The longitudinal analysis further narrowed the sample to the panel of respondents with data before, during, and/or after the pandemic and explored individual employment transitions for both genders.

4. Results

4.1. Cross-Sectional Results

The gender distribution within employment statuses in Argentina showed a clear pattern, as shown in Table A2 in the Appendix A: while men consistently represented a larger percentage of the labor force within the informal and formal private sectors, women were overrepresented in public sector employment over the period of analysis. This distribution, in turn, correlated with how each sector responded during and after the pandemic. Table 1 shows the employment status percentages of men and women from Q4 2019 to Q4 2021. In the pre-pandemic period, men and women's inactivity rates remained steady. However, by Q2 2020, inactivity rose sharply to 27.2% for men and 48.0% for women. By 2021, these rates returned to pre-pandemic figures. Informal employment decreased with the pandemic's onset, recovering by the beginning of 2021 among men and toward the end of that year among women. Formal public employment initially remained stable, but from Q1 2021, an increase was observed, much more among women (14.1%) than among men (12.2%). Formal private sector employment initially decreased slightly, with men recovering faster by the beginning of 2021. Unemployment remained stable until late 2021, decreasing to around 5% for both genders. Lastly, self-employment initially declined but bounced back by Q4 2020.

Table 1. Percentage of Employment Status Before, During and After thePandemic by Gender.

	Before		During			After			
	Fourth Quarter	First Quarter	Second Quarter	Third Quarter	Fourth Quarter	First Quarter	Second Quarter	Third Quarter	Fourth Quarter
Employment Status	**2019**	**2020**	**2020**	**2020**	**2020**	**2021**	**2021**	**2021**	**2021**
Men									
Inactive	15.9	15.8	27.2	21.1	17.3	14.4	14.8	15.2	15.0
Informal	17.3	17.4	9.6	12.6	15.8	16.7	15.3	15.5	16.8
Public Formal Employment	11.5	11.5	11.6	11.6	11.5	12.2	12.6	12.7	11.6
Private Formal Employment	26.4	26.4	26.7	25.0	24.7	26.9	27.2	26.8	28.9
Unemployed	5.8	6.2	7.0	5.8	6.9	6.1	5.8	5.3	5.0
Self-employed	23.1	22.7	18.0	23.9	23.9	23.7	24.4	24.5	22.8
Total (unweighted)	16,924	14,967	10,716	12,076	12,791	13,517	13,687	14,273	14,707
Women									
Inactive	36.7	36.6	48.0	43.2	39.8	37.2	37.3	35.7	35.6
Informal	14.9	14.4	7.7	9.3	10.7	11.7	11.6	13.8	14.0
Public Formal Employment	12.5	12.8	12.8	13.1	12.6	14.1	15.7	15.4	14.1
Private Formal Employment	16.4	16.0	15.2	14.9	15.0	14.8	15.4	15.1	16.7
Unemployed	5.7	6.8	6.6	6.6	6.3	7.8	6.0	5.9	5.2
Self-employed	13.8	13.6	9.7	12.8	15.5	14.4	14.0	14.1	14.4
Total (unweighted)	18,357	16,325	11,790	13,241	13,908	14,778	14,918	15,576	15,933

Source: Based on Encuesta Permanente de Hogares 2019–2021, Argentina (EPH). *Notes:* Percentages obtained with weighted observations.

Table 2 displays the quarter-by-quarter differences in the percentages of each employment status during and after the pandemic compared to the first quarter of 2020—that is, the quarter preceding the onset of COVID-19—for both men and women. The table also displays the results of *t*-tests to ascertain whether these differences are statistically significant. The findings from Table 2 illustrate both a general trend in the pace of recovery in labor market position, as well as an overall description of employment sectors accounting for these shifts during the pandemic. Before the COVID-19 pandemic in Q4 2019 and Q1 2020, employment status percentages for both genders remained stable in Argentina. However,

by Q2 2020, the pandemic significantly increased inactivity levels by around 11 percentage points for both genders. As inactivity rose, employment in the vulnerable informal and self-employment sectors dropped: men saw decreases of 7.8 and 4.7 points, respectively, while women experienced drops of 6.7 and 3.8 points. Interestingly, employment in the formal sector remained stable during Q2 2020. Comparing Q1 and Q3 of 2020, gender differences in labor market recovery emerged. Men exhibited a quicker recovery, with an inactivity rise of 5.3 points from Q1, while women saw a 6.7-point increase. Men also rebounded faster in informal and self-employment. By Q3, men's informal employment was down by 4.8 points from Q1, compared to women's 5.1-point decrease. In self-employment, men gained 1.1 points, but women dropped 0.7 points. Both genders experienced declines in the formal private sector: -1.4 points for men and -1.0 for women. However, public employment remained stable, indicating its buffering role against the pandemic's initial impact, as supported by regional literature. By Q4 2020, these trends deepened, with men's recovery outpacing women's, particularly in informal employment.

Table 2 also contrasts post-pandemic inter-quarterly employment status variations against Q1 2020 for both genders. By Q1 2021, distinct gender disparities emerged. Men's inactivity rate declined by 1.4 points, suggesting faster reintegration into the Argentine labor market compared to women.[3] By Q1 2021, men also regained their pre-pandemic formal private employment levels, while women lagged by 1.1 points. Similar gender differences were evident for informal employment: while men recovered pre-pandemic informal private employment levels during Q1 2021, women lagged behind by 2.7 points. This quarter also indicated a growing feminization trend in formal public employment: while both genders saw increases, women's rise was 0.6 points more than men's (1.3 vs. 0.7 points, respectively). This gap expanded to 1.8 points in Q2 2021. By Q4 2021, both genders' inactivity levels reverted to below pre-pandemic levels. However, distinct gender patterns emerged: the percentage of men in the formal private sector grew by 2.5 points from Q1 2020, while women's rose by only 0.8 points. By the end of 2021, women's public employment surpassed pre-pandemic levels more than men's, with gains of 1.3 vs. 0.1 points, underscoring the feminization trend in Argentina's public sector.

4.2. Panel Data Results

In this section, we present the panel data results for individuals with information on employment status before, during, and/or after the pandemic to analyze specific transitions between employment categories. Table 3 reports changes in employment transitions for men and women during two periods: (a) during the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and (b) after the reopening of economic activities in Argentina. For analytical purposes, we focused on three quarters: Q2 2020 (during the pandemic), Q1 2021, and Q4 2021 (both post-pandemic). Tables A3 and A4 in the Appendix A include the results for the nine quarters in our sample. The following set of analyses provides a detailed description of individual employment transitions over the analyzed period, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of labor processes in the country.

Table 2. Differences in Percentages of Employment Status Before, During and After the Pandemic by Gender (First Quarter 2020 Ref) and Statistical Significance (Two-Sample T Test).

	Before		During					After							
	Fourth Quarter 2019–First Quarter 2020		Second Quarter 2020–First Quarter 2020		Third Quarter 2020–First Quarter 2020		Fourth Quarter 2020–First Quarter 2020	First Quarter 2021–First Quarter 2020		Second Quarter 2021–First Quarter 2020		Third Quarter 2021–First Quarter 2020		Fourth Quarter 2021–First Quarter 2020	
Employment Status															
Men															
Inactive	0.1		11.3	**	5.3	**	1.5	**	−1.4	**	−1.0	**	−0.6		−0.8	*
Informal	−0.1		−7.8	**	−4.8	**	−1.6	**	−0.7		−2.1	**	−1.9	**	−0.6	
Public Formal Employment	0.0		0.1		0.2		0.0		0.7	*	1.1	**	1.2	**	0.1	
Private Formal Employment	−0.1		0.2		−1.4	**	−1.8	**	0.5		0.8		0.4		2.5	**
Unemployed	−0.3		0.8	**	−0.4		0.7	**	0.0		−0.4		−0.8	**	−1.2	**
Self-employed	0.3		–4.7	**	1.1	**	1.2	**	0.9	*	1.6	**	1.7	**	0.0	
Women															
Inactive	0.2		11.4	**	6.7	**	3.3	**	0.7		0.7		−0.8		−0.9	*
Informal	0.5		−6.7	**	−5.1	**	−3.7	**	−2.7	**	−2.9	**	−0.6		−0.4	
Public Formal Employment	−0.3		0.0		0.3		−0.2		1.3	**	2.9	**	2.6	**	1.3	**
Private Formal Employment	0.4		−0.7	*	−1.0	**	−1.0	**	−1.1	**	−0.5		−0.8	**	0.8	*
Unemployed	−1.1	**	−0.2		−0.2		−0.4		1.0	**	−0.8	**	−0.8	**	−1.6	**
Self-employed	0.3		–3.8	**	–0.7	*	2.0	**	0.9	**	0.5		0.5		0.9	**

Source: Based on Encuesta Permanente de Hogares 2019–2021, Argentina (EPH). *Notes:* Difference statistically significant at * $p \leq 0.10$ and ** $p \leq 0.05$.

Table 3. Employment Status Transitions During and After the Pandemic by Gender (%).

Men																							
	Employment Status in Q2 2020							**Employment Status in Q1 2021**								**Employment Status in Q4 2021**							
Employment Status in Q1 2020	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q4 2020**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q3 2021**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**
Inactive	81.7	2.4	2.0	0.2	7.5	6.2	14.7	Inactive	69.3	8.1	1.2	2.5	8.7	10.3	16.6	Inactive	75.5	6.1	1.6	2.9	5.5	8.3	15.9
Informal	27.6	33.9	1.2	7.7	14.4	15.1	16.7	Informal	4.0	69.7	0.7	4.6	6.3	14.7	16.6	Informal	4.9	62.1	1.7	10.6	5.7	15.1	14.6
Public Formal Employment	2.9	3.9	84.3	5.6	1.1	2.3	11.8	Public Formal Employment	2.0	2.7	84.8	8.4	0.8	1.4	12.4	Public Formal Employment	1.4	1.8	82.4	8.1	1.9	4.5	13.3
Private Formal Employment	3.2	2.9	4.1	84.8	2.9	2.2	27.7	Private Formal Employment	0.8	4.0	3.8	88.5	0.9	1.9	23.6	Private Formal Employment	2.1	5.4	3.2	84.3	1.6	3.4	26.1
Unemployed	39.8	8.0	3.1	1.0	35.5	12.6	6.0	Unemployed	8.3	28.5	2.4	10.1	39.0	11.7	5.6	Unemployed	14.3	21.2	1.1	4.1	42.5	16.8	4.8
Self-employed	29.8	5.0	1.3	2.7	3.8	57.5	23.1	Self-employed	3.4	12.6	1.0	1.4	2.3	79.2	25.2	Self-employed	5.4	13.8	0.9	4.1	3.8	72.0	25.4
Total	27.1	8.9	12.1	26.1	7.4	18.4		Total	13.9	19.0	12.1	24.0	5.6	25.4		Total	15.5	16.2	12.6	26.3	5.4	24.1	
Women																							
	Employment Status in Q2 2020							**Employment Status in Q1 2021**								**Employment Status in Q4 2021**							
Employment Status in Q1 2020	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q4 2020**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q3 2021**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**
Inactive	87.7	1.8	1.0	0.6	4.7	4.1	34.8	Inactive	80.1	4.3	0.8	0.7	7.7	6.4	38.0	Inactive	77.4	8.2	1.7	1.1	4.1	7.6	36.3
Informal	41.5	38.2	1.6	3.0	8.8	6.9	14.3	Informal	15.3	57.8	1.6	8.8	8.6	8.0	11.0	Informal	10.7	59.0	3.9	12.4	3.4	10.7	12.3
Public Formal Employment	3.9	2.4	86.0	6.1	0.7	0.9	13.8	Public Formal Employment	2.1	1.4	90.0	5.2	0.4	0.8	13.6	Public Formal Employment	4.2	4.1	80.5	7.8	0.5	2.9	16.9
Private Formal Employment	4.0	5.3	7.4	79.4	3.2	0.7	16.8	Private Formal Employment	2.1	3.0	7.0	86.3	0.7	0.9	14.2	Private Formal Employment	4.3	8.1	5.6	75.8	1.5	4.8	15.6
Unemployed	61.9	7.2	1.0	3.1	21.5	5.3	6.7	Unemployed	29.2	10.7	0.3	1.3	50.6	8.1	6.3	Unemployed	42.7	15.8	1.3	5.2	22.6	12.4	5.6
Self-employed	35.9	4.9	0.5	2.2	5.2	51.3	13.7	Self-employed	14.2	7.7	0.5	2.1	6.5	69.1	16.9	Self-employed	14.2	9.0	1.6	2.3	3.7	69.2	13.4
Total	46.7	8.4	13.8	15.4	5.6	10.0		Total	37.0	10.6	13.8	14.6	8.3	15.8		Total	35.1	14.3	15.8	15.6	4.0	15.2	

Source: Based on Encuesta Permanente de Hogares 2020–2021, Argentina (EPH). *Notes:* Percentages obtained with weighted observations.

The panel data results presented in Table 3 highlight the mechanisms explaining the trends described with the cross-sectional data regarding the immediate and longer-term impacts of the pandemic. Firstly, focusing on the short-term impact of the pandemic, and considering employment transitions from before the pandemic (Q1 2020) to during the pandemic (Q2 2020), the results revealed a substantial increase in inactivity among both men and women. This rise in the percentage of inactive individuals can be attributed to the transition of men and women previously employed in the informal sector and self-employed, as well as those who were unemployed before the pandemic. Indeed, 27.6% of men and 41.5% of women in informal employment became inactive during the early months of the pandemic. At the same time, 29.8% and 39.8% of men who were previously self-employed and unemployed shifted to inactivity during Q2 2020, while for women these percentages were 35.9% and 61.9%, respectively. However, the results indicated stability in formal public and private sector employment during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic. Approximately 85% of men and women employed in the formal public sector before the pandemic remained in that labor market position during the second quarter of 2020, although this percentage was slightly larger among women than among men (86.0% vs. 84.3%, respectively). Moreover, around 80% of salaried employees in the formal private sector stayed in that category. However, in the latter case, the stability pattern was slightly lower among women, who also transitioned to inactivity, informal employment, and formal public sector employment.

These results are in line with the changes in the composition of employment statuses described with the cross-sectional data, and they also explain the labor transitions driving these changes in the short-term impact of the pandemic. In particular, the panel data analysis showed that, at the beginning of the pandemic, the rise in inactivity was similar among both men and women (from 14.7% in Q1 2020 to 27.1% in Q2 2020 among men, and from 34.8% to 46.7% among women), and this increase was mainly driven by individuals who were employed in the informal sector, self-employed, or unemployed before the pandemic. Despite these similarities, the results also pointed out incipient gender differences pertaining to job stability: while men were more prone to stay in formal private jobs than women, women were slightly more likely to remain and/or to move into formal public employment than men.

Table 3 also reports the employment transitions from Q4 2020 to Q1 2021 and from Q3 2021 to Q4 2021, which constitute the period of economic recovery and reopening of non-essential activities in the country. The results reinforce the previously described trends. Firstly, the results showed that the Argentine post-pandemic labor market was able to keep men in the workforce at a higher rate than women. Thus, during the first quarter of 2021, men who were previously inactive showed a higher tendency than women to rejoin the labor force. While 30.7% of previously inactive men reentered the labor force in Q1 2021, this percentage was only 19.9% among women, which was approximately 10 percentage points lower than among men. It was in the last quarter of 2021 that the probability of remaining inactive became relatively similar between women (77.4%) and men (75.5%).

Furthermore, the panel data results showed that among those in informal employment, the probability of transitioning to inactivity was larger among women than among men throughout the economic recovery period. Indeed, while 15.3% of women previously employed in the informal sector continued to exit the labor force in Q1 2021, this percentage was only 4.0% among men. This trend persisted during Q4 2021: while 10.7% of women in informal employment in Q3 2021 continued to transition to inactivity in Q4 2021, this percentage was 4.9% among men. Thus, the panel data results during the post-pandemic period suggested that the informal sector proved to be a more stable source of employment for men than for women. A similar gender pattern was seen in self-employment: while 14.2% of self-employed women continued to transition to inactivity in Q4 2021, this percentage was only 5.4% among men.

The results also showed that the formal private sector became increasingly masculinized. On the one hand, the probability of remaining employed in the formal private sector

was higher among men than among women. While between Q4 2020 and Q1 2021, the probability of remaining in such position was similar among women (86.3%) and men (88.5%), in Q4 2021, only 75.8% of women in formal private employment in the previous quarter continued in that position, compared to 84.3% of men. The results also showed that during Q1 2021, previously unemployed men were re-employed as formal workers in the private sector to a much greater extent than women (10.1% vs. 1.3%, respectively).

Finally, the panel data results confirmed the feminization of the public sector during the longer-term impact of the pandemic through two complementary processes. On the one hand, while most men and women employed in the formal public sector in Q4 2020 remained in the same position at the beginning of 2021, the probability of remaining in public employment was considerably larger among women (90.0%) than among men (84.8%). On the other hand, in Q4 2021, a higher percentage of women previously employed in the formal private sector transitioned to public employment (5.6%) than men (3.2%). These differences could be seen starting from the second quarter of 2021, as displayed in Table A4 in the Appendix A, when public sector employment began to absorb women from other employment positions to a greater extent than men. Likewise, among those who were informally employed, the probability of transitioning to the formal public sector in Q4 2021 was larger among women (3.9%) than among men (1.7%).

To further reinforce these results, the cross-sectional descriptive data on industrial sectors before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Argentina (Table A5 in the Appendix A) showed three main trends. First, there were no substantial differences among men in the distribution of industrial sectors over the period analyzed. Indeed, except for the Manufacturing, Trade, and Lodging and Food Services sectors, the percentage of men employed across industries remained relatively stable during and after the pandemic. Second, historically gendered branches of activity, such as Domestic Work, showed the largest declines in employment during and after the pandemic. And third, women relied more on industries with high state participation—e.g., education and social and health services—to ameliorate the effects of the economic crisis. The latter may imply that women who were dismissed from their previous jobs found in the public sector a way to remain in the workforce.

In summary, the panel data results showed that, on the one hand, men reentered the labor market sooner than women. On the other hand, the results pointed out gender differences in the recovery of each employment sector. Indeed, informal jobs proved to be a more stable source of employment among men than among women. Furthermore, the probability of remaining employed in the formal private sector was also larger among men than among women. In contrast, formal public employment was more concentrated among women than among men, with women not only having a higher probability of remaining in that same position but also of transitioning from other labor market positions to public employment.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined the COVID-19 pandemic's immediate and longer-term impacts on Argentina's labor market with a focus on gender disparities and the mediating role of the public vs. private sectors. Using household survey data, we assessed men and women's employment trends before, during, and after the pandemic. The study adds to the literature on gender and the economic consequences of the pandemic in two main ways. First, we interacted gender with informality and public and private sector employment. Doing so allowed us to assess the disparate impacts of the pandemic among men and women employed in informal or formal public and private sector employment. Second, we took advantage of the panel design of household surveys for a more precise focus on employment transitions before, during, and after the pandemic.

Overall, it is important to highlight that the labor market post-pandemic recovery in Argentina was quite remarkable. By the fourth quarter of 2021, men and women had in many ways regained their employment positions with some variation in type of

employment representation. Gender differences were clear in the timing of the recovery. The most prominent short-term effect of the pandemic was a dramatic increase in inactivity for both men and women, for whom inactivity increased 11 percentage points in the second quarter of 2020 as compared to before the pandemic. For men though, inactivity declined to below pre-pandemic levels in the first quarter of 2021. It took women 6 months longer, that is, the third quarter of 2021, to regain pre-pandemic inactivity levels.

The panel data focused on employment transitions and illuminated the mechanisms producing gender differences. The results showed that it was the relatively slower recovery of informal private sector employment among women that slowed down their labor market reintegration. Informal private sector employment was a driving force reincorporating men into the labor market; however, the same pattern was not visible among women. Moreover, women depended on the recovery and extension of formal public sector employment to regain their economic position. The public sector has been a driving force expanding female employment in Argentina (Gasparini et al. 2015; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2016, 2020). The policies of the Argentine government implemented to mitigate the negative economic effects of the pandemic protected formal and public sector employment. The two forces produced a female labor force by the end of the pandemic that was even more dependent on public sector employment than before the pandemic.

In addition, the analysis of transitions showed that the movement out of informal and self-employment that fueled the expansion of inactivity shortly after the pandemic continued among women for a longer period than among men. Women employed in the informal sector and self-employed continued transitioning into inactivity well into the fourth quarter of 2021, while the pattern had basically stopped among men toward the end of 2020. As a result, while the short-term effect of the pandemic was virtually identical for men and women, if we extend the period of consideration, our results show that the negative impact was stronger among women than men.

There are a number of reasons that may explain these trends. The observed gender differences in labor transitions during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Argentina may have been influenced by a variety of interconnected factors. It appears that women were less likely to return to their jobs, and this could be attributed to several potential reasons. First, it seems to be the case that the economic sectors in which women were predominantly employed, such as domestic work, recovered at a slower pace than male-dominated industries like construction or manufacturing. This slower recovery could have made it more challenging for women to promptly rejoin the labor force. Occupational sex segregation may also play a significant role in explaining these differences. The concentration of women in lower-paying and less secure jobs has historically been a structural issue in many countries, including Argentina. This occupational segregation could have left women in a more vulnerable position during the economic downturn and hindered their ability to bounce back when economic activity improved. Additionally, it may be the case that women's traditional role as primary caregivers potentially delayed their return to the labor force. The increased caregiving responsibilities brought about by school closures and the heightened demands of healthcare during and after the pandemic may have disproportionately fallen on women. This caregiving burden could have made it difficult for many women to return to the labor market as they had to juggle their work responsibilities with childcare and other family responsibilities. In conclusion, it is possible that the observed gender differences in labor market reintegration during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Argentina were influenced by a combination of factors, including the slower recovery of employment sectors predominantly occupied by women, occupational sex segregation, and the potential caregiving responsibilities that women often shoulder. Further research and analysis are necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics and their impact on gender inequality in the labor market.

Overall, the results illustrate the value of panel data for understanding employment transitions and the effect of sudden economic disruptions, such as the pandemic or eco-

nomic crises. Given Argentina's history of recurrent financial crises, the approach can be extended to these other situations. Substantively, the results further reinforce the salience of public sector employment for women's economic position. Here, differences between employment disruptions resulting from the pandemic and financial crises might be important. Public sector employment was protected during the pandemic. Even more, the health needs of the Argentine population, i.e., healthcare workers primarily, actually contributed to its expansion. In times of financial crises though, that is not the case. The austerity and public sector deficit control political choices that result from financial crises might produce a different environment for public sector employment. In such circumstances, the need for reducing fiscal deficits may actually hinder the possibility of expanding public sector employment. Comparative analyses with a focus on employment transitions and sector employment might shed additional light on how gender interacts with informality and the public sector for understanding the economic consequences of sudden crises.

Lastly, it is worth noting that the case of Argentina may offer valuable insight into the experiences of women in other Latin American countries, where they are often overrepresented in public sector employment. While more research is needed to draw conclusive comparisons, the Argentine case serves as a crucial input for predicting how women might navigate similar crises and the extent to which the state can serve as a short-term solution. Moreover, recent political changes, in particular the election of a candidate who campaigned on a libertarian agenda, leave open the question of public sector employment and the implications for gender inequalities in the labor market. This knowledge can guide policymakers and researchers alike in developing strategies to bolster gender equity and economic resilience when facing future challenges in the region.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Full Names of Programs in English, in Spanish and their Acronyms in Spanish.

Name of the Program in English	Name of the Program in Spanish	Acronym in Spanish
Emergency Assistance Program for Work and Production	Programa de Asistencia de Emergencia al Trabajo y la Producción	ATP
Emergency Family Income	Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia	IFE
Productive Recovery Program	Programa de Recuperación Productiva	REPRO
Universal Child Allowance	Asignación Universal por Hijo	AUH
Universal Pregnancy Allowance	Asignación Universal por Embarazo	AUE

Table A2. Gender Distribution Within Each Employment Status Before, During and After the Pandemic (%).

	Before			**During**			**After**					
	First Quarter			**Second Quarter**			**First Quarter**			**Fourth Quarter**		
Employment Status	**2020**			**2020**			**2021**			**2021**		
	Men	Women	Total (unweighted)	Men	Women	Total (unweighted)	Men	Women	Total (unweighted)	Men	Women	Total (unweighted)
Inactive	28.6	71.4	8336	34.0	66.0	8567	27.0	73.0	7443	28.7	71.3	7888
Informal	52.8	47.2	4952	53.3	46.7	1934	57.7	42.3	3984	53.5	46.5	4706
Public Formal Employment	45.4	54.6	3808	45.2	54.8	2752	45.3	54.7	3728	44.1	55.9	3946
Private Formal Employment	60.5	39.5	6558	61.4	38.6	4654	63.5	36.5	5828	62.3	37.7	6908
Unemployed	45.7	54.3	2024	49.1	51.0	1519	43.0	57.0	1981	47.9	52.1	1549
Self-employed	60.9	39.2	5616	62.8	37.3	3079	61.1	38.9	5333	60.1	39.9	5648

Source: Based on Encuesta Permanente de Hogares 2020–2021, Argentina (EPH). *Notes:* Percentages obtained with weighted observations.

Table A3. Employment Status Transitions Before and During the Pandemic by Gender (%).

Men

Employment Status in Q1 2020								Employment Status in Q2 2020								Employment Status in Q3 2020								Employment Status in Q4 2020							
Employment Status in Q4 2019	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q1 2020**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q2 2020**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q3 2020**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**
Inactive	71.3	7.5	2.8	1.3	8.0	9.1	16.5	Inactive	81.7	2.4	2.0	0.2	7.5	6.2	14.7	Inactive	60.7	5.9	0.5	0.9	9.3	22.7	26.3	Inactive	64.7	10.1	0.9	2.2	9.8	12.4	21.7
Informal	7.3	58.4	1.0	7.5	9.7	16.1	17.4	Informal	27.6	33.9	1.2	7.7	14.4	15.1	16.7	Informal	13.1	59.3	3.9	9.9	3.1	10.7	10.4	Informal	4.6	66.0	0.4	9.2	5.5	14.4	13.5
Public Formal Employment	2.8	2.0	83.5	8.3	0.5	3.0	11.5	Public Formal Employment	2.9	3.9	84.3	5.6	1.1	2.3	11.8	Public Formal Employment	1.4	5.1	85.7	5.5	0.3	2.0	10.8	Public Formal Employment	1.0	3.3	87.8	5.5	0.1	2.3	12.6
Private Formal Employment	2.0	5.1	2.9	87.5	1.2	1.3	25.6	Private Formal Employment	3.2	2.9	4.1	84.8	2.9	2.2	27.7	Private Formal Employment	1.4	2.2	3.9	88.9	1.2	2.4	25.7	Private Formal Employment	0.5	2.0	4.0	89.8	1.9	1.7	24.5
Unemployed	22.0	19.4	2.1	6.2	37.2	13.1	5.4	Unemployed	39.8	8.0	3.1	1.0	35.5	12.6	6.0	Unemployed	25.6	23.7	0.4	4.4	27.5	18.4	6.3	Unemployed	14.7	25.5	1.5	5.6	45.4	7.4	6.2
Self-employed	5.9	12.6	1.2	2.1	3.8	74.4	23.7	Self-employed	29.8	5.0	1.3	2.7	3.8	57.5	23.1	Self-employed	3.8	7.1	1.4	1.8	1.8	84.1	20.6	Self-employed	4.6	8.3	2.4	1.3	2.4	81.0	21.5
Total	16.4	17.0	11.4	25.7	6.3	23.3		Total	27.1	8.9	12.1	26.1	7.4	18.4		Total	20.2	11.8	11.1	25.3	5.2	26.4		Total	16.8	15.4	12.9	25.0	6.7	23.2	

Women

Employment Status in Q1 2020								Employment Status in Q2 2020								Employment Status in Q3 2020								Employment Status in Q4 2020							
Employment Status in Q4 2019	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q1 2020**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q2 2020**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q3 2020**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**
Inactive	80.0	5.6	0.6	0.8	6.5	6.6	36.9	Inactive	87.7	1.8	1.0	0.6	4.7	4.1	34.8	Inactive	82.9	5.0	0.7	2.2	4.5	4.8	46.3	Inactive	79.1	4.6	0.6	1.0	6.2	8.5	42.9
Informal	15.0	63.4	3.6	4.9	6.4	6.8	14.7	Informal	41.5	38.2	1.6	3.0	8.8	6.9	14.3	Informal	18.8	59.1	2.9	9.1	3.0	7.1	6.9	Informal	11.4	69.2	2.0	4.9	4.7	7.9	8.2
Public Formal Employment	2.1	1.7	87.9	6.3	1.2	1.0	12.0	Public Formal Employment	3.9	2.4	86.0	6.1	0.7	0.9	13.8	Public Formal Employment	1.8	2.8	87.5	7.0	0.3	0.7	12.5	Public Formal Employment	1.0	1.6	93.4	2.6	0.0	1.4	14.0
Private Formal Employment	2.1	7.1	6.2	80.5	2.3	1.9	15.5	Private Formal Employment	4.0	5.3	7.4	79.4	3.2	0.7	16.8	Private Formal Employment	3.7	2.9	3.2	87.8	0.6	1.7	16.5	Private Formal Employment	1.4	3.2	2.6	89.7	1.4	1.7	14.2
Unemployed	37.2	15.7	2.1	1.8	33.3	9.9	6.0	Unemployed	61.9	7.2	1.0	3.1	21.5	5.3	6.7	Unemployed	37.6	10.9	3.9	1.7	33.5	12.5	7.1	Unemployed	28.7	16.6	2.1	0.4	43.6	8.6	6.2
Self-employed	18.5	7.4	1.0	1.1	5.1	66.9	14.9	Self-employed	35.9	4.9	0.5	2.2	5.2	51.3	13.7	Self-employed	19.8	12.1	0.9	1.2	4.3	61.8	10.7	Self-employed	12.7	6.0	2.0	1.1	3.5	74.6	14.6
Total	37.3	14.7	12.5	14.5	6.6	14.4		Total	46.7	8.4	13.8	15.4	5.6	10.0		Total	45.3	9.3	12.4	17.3	5.3	10.6		Total	38.8	10.3	14.3	14.1	6.4	16.2	

Source: Based on Encuesta Permanente de Hogares 2019–2020, Argentina (EPH). *Notes:* Percentages obtained with weighted observations.

Table A4. Employment Status Transitions After the Pandemic by Gender (%).

Men

Employment Status in Q1 2021								Employment Status in Q2 2021								Employment Status in Q3 2021								Employment Status in Q4 2021							
Employment Status in Q4 2020	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q1 2021**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q2 2021**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q3 2021**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**
Inactive	69.3	8.1	1.2	2.5	8.7	10.3	16.6	Inactive	71.8	9.1	1.2	2.2	6.3	9.4	14.3	Inactive	68.3	9.1	2.0	1.4	8.8	10.5	14.9	Inactive	75.5	6.1	1.6	2.9	5.5	8.3	15.9
Informal	4.0	69.7	0.7	4.6	6.3	14.7	16.6	Informal	7.5	57.5	1.1	9.9	8.9	15.1	16.9	Informal	4.9	62.7	3.0	12.1	4.5	12.8	14.0	Informal	4.9	62.1	1.7	10.6	5.7	15.1	14.6
Public Formal Employment	2.0	2.7	84.8	8.4	0.8	1.4	12.4	Public Formal Employment	1.1	1.0	86.6	9.8	0.4	1.1	13.2	Public Formal Employment	2.0	3.3	84.8	7.8	0.1	2.0	14.3	Public Formal Employment	1.4	1.8	82.4	8.1	1.9	4.5	13.3
Private Formal Employment	0.8	4.0	3.8	88.5	0.9	1.9	23.6	Private Formal Employment	2.0	3.8	2.7	87.9	1.2	2.5	27.2	Private Formal Employment	0.6	3.2	3.2	88.6	1.6	2.8	25.3	Private Formal Employment	2.1	5.4	3.2	84.3	1.6	3.4	26.1
Unemployed	8.3	28.5	2.4	10.1	39.0	11.7	5.6	Unemployed	14.4	18.8	0.9	2.3	42.1	21.6	5.8	Unemployed	22.0	22.6	0.3	5.7	33.9	15.7	6.0	Unemployed	14.3	21.2	1.1	4.1	42.5	16.8	4.8
Self-employed	3.4	12.6	1.0	1.4	2.3	79.2	25.2	Self-employed	5.4	12.3	1.6	4.9	1.9	74.0	22.6	Self-employed	6.4	13.7	2.2	3.6	4.5	69.6	25.6	Self-employed	5.4	13.8	0.9	4.1	3.8	72.0	25.4
Total	13.9	19.0	12.1	24.0	5.6	25.4		Total	14.3	16.1	12.9	28.4	5.6	22.7		Total	14.2	16.3	14.2	26.7	5.5	23.1		Total	15.5	16.2	12.6	26.3	5.4	24.1	

Women

Employment Status in Q1 2021								Employment Status in Q2 2021								Employment Status in Q3 2021								Employment Status in Q4 2021							
Employment Status in Q4 2020	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q1 2021**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q2 2021**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**	**Employment Status in Q3 2021**	**Inact.**	**Informal**	**Public Formal**	**Private Formal**	**Unemp**	**Self-Emp**	**Total**
Inactive	80.1	4.3	0.8	0.7	7.7	6.4	38.0	Inactive	78.8	5.3	3.4	1.5	5.3	5.7	36.8	Inactive	78.1	4.5	1.1	0.8	6.5	9.0	34.6	Inactive	77.4	8.2	1.7	1.1	4.1	7.6	36.3
Informal	15.3	57.8	1.6	8.8	8.6	8.0	11.0	Informal	23.5	53.7	1.6	6.7	8.0	6.5	10.8	Informal	12.3	64.8	4.3	6.9	6.0	5.7	11.6	Informal	10.7	59.0	3.9	12.4	3.4	10.7	12.3
Public Formal Employment	2.1	1.4	90.0	5.2	0.4	0.8	13.6	Public Formal Employment	2.6	1.9	83.9	7.9	0.2	3.5	15.7	Public Formal Employment	9.0	2.4	81.7	4.3	0.2	2.5	17.9	Public Formal Employment	4.2	4.1	80.5	7.8	0.5	2.9	16.9
Private Formal Employment	2.1	3.0	7.0	86.3	0.7	0.9	14.2	Private Formal Employment	2.5	3.8	5.6	86.7	0.4	1.0	14.2	Private Formal Employment	3.4	9.6	9.9	74.5	1.0	1.8	14.2	Private Formal Employment	4.3	8.1	5.6	75.8	1.5	4.8	15.6
Unemployed	29.2	10.7	0.3	1.3	50.6	8.1	6.3	Unemployed	44.0	12.4	2.1	2.6	22.4	16.5	8.2	Unemployed	30.8	18.5	1.6	3.6	30.6	14.9	6.6	Unemployed	42.7	15.8	1.3	5.2	22.6	12.4	5.6
Self-employed	14.2	7.7	0.5	2.1	6.5	69.1	16.9	Self-employed	17.3	10.0	1.2	1.3	6.9	63.4	14.4	Self-employed	19.9	9.6	0.9	5.9	2.5	61.2	15.2	Self-employed	14.2	9.0	1.6	2.3	3.7	69.2	13.4
Total	37.0	10.6	13.8	14.6	8.3	15.8		Total	38.3	11.0	15.7	15.3	5.7	14.0		Total	35.6	13.5	17.1	13.5	5.5	14.8		Total	35.1	14.3	15.8	15.6	4.0	15.2	

Source: Based on Encuesta Permanente de Hogares 2020–2021, Argentina (EPH). *Notes:* Percentages obtained with weighted observations.

Table A5. Percentage of Employees by Industrial Sector Before, During and After the Pandemic by Gender.

Men	Fourth Quarter 2019	First Quarter 2020	Second Quarter 2020	Third Quarter 2020	Fourth Quarter 2020	First Quarter 2021	Second Quarter 2021	Third Quarter 2021	Fourth Quarter 2021
Primary Activities	2.8	2.9	3.9	2.5	2.2	3.1	3.9	3.6	2.8
Manufacturing Industry	13.7	13.5	14.6	15.0	16.0	15.0	13.8	13.4	14.6
Trade	18.9	20.0	19.2	19.0	17.0	17.4	18.2	19.5	20.3
Transportation, Storage and Communication	11.9	11.3	11.7	12.1	10.9	12.0	12.5	11.8	11.4
Lodging and Food Services	4.0	4.4	3.5	3.5	2.8	2.8	3.8	3.4	3.4
Financial and Business Services	10.5	10.7	11.3	10.6	11.2	12.7	11.1	10.8	11.4
Teaching	3.8	3.4	4.9	4.4	3.8	3.5	3.7	3.7	4.3
Social and Health services	3.6	3.2	3.4	4.0	3.8	3.4	3.3	3.4	3.3
Construction	16.0	15.1	11.7	15.1	18.2	14.8	14.7	14.9	14.4
Public Administration and Defense	8.7	9.4	10.6	9.0	8.5	9.4	9.8	10.0	8.6
Other Community, Social and Personal Services	5.4	5.6	4.9	4.6	5.4	5.8	5.1	5.3	5.4
Domestic Work	0.8	0.6	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.2
Total (unweighted)	16,924	14,967	10,716	12,076	12,791	13,517	13,687	14,273	14,707
Women	**Fourth Quarter 2019**	**First Quarter 2020**	**Second Quarter 2020**	**Third Quarter 2020**	**Fourth Quarter 2020**	**First Quarter 2021**	**Second Quarter 2021**	**Third Quarter 2021**	**Fourth Quarter 2021**
Primary Activities	0.6	1.0	0.8	1.0	0.4	0.8	1.1	0.9	0.4
Manufacturing Industry	7.6	8.2	9.1	7.8	10.1	8.2	7.1	6.6	8.4
Trade	16.9	16.5	16.0	16.6	16.9	19.0	17.4	18.0	17.9
Transportation, Storage and Communication	2.5	2.5	1.9	2.0	2.0	2.8	2.7	2.7	2.7
Lodging and Food Services	4.4	4.0	2.2	4.1	3.0	3.2	3.2	3.5	3.8
Financial and Business Services	10.4	10.3	10.5	10.2	10.8	9.6	10.6	10.5	11.3
Teaching	14.3	14.2	17.6	15.9	15.3	14.4	15.7	14.3	15.1
Social and Health services	10.2	10.1	12.5	11.5	11.5	12.1	11.0	11.5	10.4
Construction	1.0	0.4	0.8	0.8	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.8	1.1
Public Administration and Defense	8.6	9.1	10.5	9.6	8.9	10.0	11.0	10.8	9.4
Other Community, Social and Personal Services	7.2	7.2	4.7	6.1	6.3	6.9	6.4	6.4	7.5
Domestic Work	16.3	16.6	13.6	14.4	14.5	12.7	13.2	14.0	12.2
Total (unweighted)	18,357	16,325	11,790	13,241	13,908	14,778	14,918	15,576	15,933

Source: Based on Encuesta Permanente de Hogares 2019–2021, Argentina (EPH). *Notes:* Percentages obtained with weighted observations.

Notes

1 Table A1 in the Appendix A lists the full Spanish names and acronyms of the programs referred to below in this section.

2 There are different definitions of informality. For instance, the International Monetary Fund argues that the informal economy consists of activities that have market value but are not formally registered (Deléchat and Medina 2020). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)/International Labour Organization (ILO) (2019, p. 156) go beyond this general definition and state that "employees are considered to have informal jobs if their employment relationship is, in law or in practice, not subject to national labor legislation, income taxation, social protection or entitlement to certain employment benefits (advance notice of dismissal, severance pay, paid annual or sick leave, etc.)." Despite these different definitions, there is an agreement that informal workers are in a more vulnerable situation than workers in the formal sector given that they are not covered by national regulations.

3 The data also suggest another point that is worth mentioning: women found it more difficult than men not only to get out of inactivity but also out of unemployment. We analyze this (and other trends) in Mertehikian and Parrado (2024).

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Remote Work, Gender Ideologies, and Fathers' Participation in Childcare during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Daniel L. Carlson [1,*], Skye McPherson [1] and Richard J. Petts [2]

[1] Department of Family and Consumer Studies, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA; skye.mcpherson@fcs.utah.edu
[2] Department of Sociology, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, USA; rjpetts@bsu.edu
* Correspondence: daniel.carlson@fcs.utah.edu

Abstract: During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work became the new reality for many fathers. Though time availability theory suggests that this newfound flexibility should lead to more domestic labor on the part of fathers, many were skeptical that fathers would step up to shoulder the load at home. Indeed, the findings are decidedly mixed on the association of fathers' remote work with their performance of housework and childcare. Nonetheless, research has yet to consider how contextual factors, such as fathers' gender ideologies and mothers' employment, may condition these associations. Using data from Wave 1 of the Study on U.S. Parents' Divisions of Labor During COVID-19 (SPDLC), we examine how gender ideology moderates the association between fathers' remote work and their performance and share of childcare during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in both sole-earner and dual-earner families. The results show, for sole-earning fathers and dual-earner fathers with egalitarian gender attitudes, that the frequency of remote work was positively associated with fathers performing more, and a greater share of, childcare during the pandemic. Yet, only dual-earner fathers with egalitarian gender attitudes performed an equal share of childcare in their families. These findings suggest that the pandemic provided structural opportunities for fathers, particularly egalitarian-minded fathers, to be the equally engaged parents they desired.

Keywords: remote work; gender ideology; gender attitudes; fathers; childcare; domestic labor; gender equality

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a time of great change and uncertainty. Social distancing protocols early in the pandemic forced Americans to spend an unprecedented amount of time at home. Ninety-three percent of households with school-aged children reported engaging in some form of remote learning (U.S. Census Bureau 2021), the vast majority of daycare centers shut down (Lin and Meghan 2023), and a majority of employees were provided options to work from home (Barrero et al. 2021).

The movement of children and work into homes created tensions as working parents had to juggle paid work with housework tasks, caring for their children, and assisting in children's remote learning (Johnson et al. 2022). Some feared that increases in childcare demands and work–family conflict would fall largely on women and exacerbate gender inequalities (Lewis 2020). Others hoped that public policy changes and the widespread use of remote work would enable fathers to act on their stated desires to be more engaged in childcare and increase their shares of domestic labor, leading to more gender equality at home (King et al. 2020; Offer and Kaplan 2021).

The findings on the association between remote work and fathers' childcare prior to the pandemic are decidedly mixed; some findings show that remote-working fathers perform more childcare, while others find that they do not (Carlson et al. 2021b; Chung

2022; Diamond and Greenstein 2002; Noonan et al. 2007). These equivocal findings may be explained not only by the fact that pre-pandemic research was subject to selection bias (i.e., fathers may have selected into remote work based on their proclivity for performing or not performing childcare), but also that the association between remote work and childcare performance may vary depending on fathers' and their partners' characteristics. Indeed, some of the main theories used to explain the division of labor in families indicate that the performance of domestic labor depends on the opportunity (e.g., time) and desire (e.g., beliefs about gendered family roles) to engage in domestic tasks. While working from home and wanting to be more engaged with children may be necessary conditions to increase fathers' performance of childcare and foster equitable childcare arrangements, alone they may be insufficient. Rather, fathers may need both the time and the desire to care for children to be more engaged fathers and equal partners. Moreover, their partners' time availability likely also matters, as working mothers' limited availability provides fathers even more opportunities (and reasons) to engage in childcare. Nonetheless, research on the pandemic has yet to consider how fathers' gender ideologies—their beliefs about gendered family roles—shape how remote work is related to their performance and shares of childcare and how this may vary by their partners' employment.

Using data collected during the lockdown period in Spring 2020 of the COVID-19 pandemic from the Study on U.S. Parents' Divisions of Labor During COVID-19 (SPDLC), this study examines the moderating role of partnered fathers' gender ideologies in the association of fathers' frequency of remote work and their time in, and shares of, childcare both in families in which mothers were employed and those in which they were not. Given the unique and natural experimental qualities of the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus a reduction of selection bias in remote work, this study builds on previous work (e.g., Lyttelton et al. 2022) to assess the contexts in which remote work may facilitate greater father involvement in childcare and potentially help to reduce gender inequalities (Brand 2015; Noonan 2013; Pedulla 2020).

2. Background

2.1. COVID-19, Remote Work, and Gender (In)equality at Home

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work was becoming a more prevalent, yet still fairly limited feature of American workplaces, with less than 5% of workers regularly working from home (Barrero et al. 2021). By April 2020, however, approximately 69% of workers were working from home at least sometimes with 51% of workers working exclusively from home (Brenan 2020).

The ability to work remotely is one of, if not the most, desired workplace benefits among American workers (Jones 2017). A primary reason for this is that remote work offers workers flexibility in managing their work, social, and family obligations, and the majority of remote workers say that this form of flexibility helps them to achieve greater work–family balance (Pew Research Center 2023). Working parents, the majority of whom lament a paucity of time with their children, particularly desire this workplace benefit (Milkie et al. 2019). Of course, working from home is not a panacea that solves all work–life problems. Working from home can also lead to overwork and blurred boundaries between work and home and thus actually increase work–family conflict and stress (Schieman and Glavin 2008; Chung 2022).

The explosion of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic was, of course, driven by social distancing policies designed to reduce the transmission of the SARS-CoV2 coronavirus. Aside from essential services, most public and private sector workplaces were shuttered in the early days of the pandemic, including schools and childcare centers. As such, not only was work thrust into the home for many working parents, but many also lost important childcare and educational supports.

Though parents reported increased family time as a benefit of pandemic lockdowns (Milkie 2020), the lockdown period also presented many challenges. Notably, working parents—and working mothers in particular—experienced increased stress during lock-

downs due to difficultly managing their own paid work responsibilities with increased care and educational obligations for children (Carlson et al. 2022; Montazer et al. 2022; Zamarro and Prados 2021). Not only did mothers continue to do the lion's share of childcare in most families during the pandemic, but they were also more likely than fathers to reduce their time in paid work as a result (Collins et al. 2021; Heggeness 2021; Petts et al. 2021). This was both true of mothers who were eligible to work remotely and those who were not (Collins et al. 2021). Indeed, though the ability to work from home appears to have helped mothers stay attached to the labor force, remote-working mothers reduced their work hours substantially when children were learning virtually or being cared for from at home (Carlson et al. 2022). Thus, although workers may perceive remote work as helpful for work–family balance under normal circumstances, this may not have been the case during pandemic lockdowns, at least for mothers, due to the loss of care supports and substantial increases in domestic responsibilities.

In response to the loss of domestic services and in-person schooling/childcare, partnered fathers appear to have to elevated their performance of domestic labor during the pandemic (Carlson et al. 2021a; Carlson and Petts 2022b; Lyttelton et al. 2022), which was somewhat protective of partnered mothers' jobs (Petts et al. 2021). There is also evidence suggesting that partnered fathers taking on more of the household management during the pandemic may have psychologically benefitted both mothers and fathers (Petts and Carlson 2023). Nonetheless, the increase in fathers' shares of domestic labor was substantively small—approximately 4%—especially when considering not only men's stated desires to be more domestically engaged (Petts 2022), but also the number of men who began working from home, many exclusively (Brenan 2020; Brynjolfsson et al. 2020). Thus, although gender inequalities in domestic labor appear to have shrunk during the pandemic, they largely persisted despite the full-time presence of many fathers in homes.

2.2. Theoretical Perspectives on Fathers' Remote Work and Performance of Childcare

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars, journalists, and pundits debated openly about whether the loss of domestic supports would fall on women, exacerbating gender inequalities, or whether men might share some of the increased domestic load, leading potentially to more equal divisions of labor in families (Calarco et al. 2021; Carlson et al. 2021a; Miller 2020). Central to this debate was the question of whether fathers, many suddenly working from home, would use their newfound flexibility to engage in housework and care tasks.

Optimism that remote work could lead to more domestic contributions among fathers stems from the time availability hypothesis (Stafford et al. 1977). According to this perspective, one's performance of domestic labor depends on the available time one has to devote to domestic tasks. Though most research measures time availability as a function of one's own paid work hours—those who work fewer hours in the paid labor force have more available time for domestic labor—time availability is also a function of job flexibility (Carlson 2021). Having a flexible schedule and/or the ability to work from home, though it does not reduce paid work hours per se, increases time availability by enabling one to devote time and energy to domestic responsibilities as needed. Working from home, in particular, also increases time availability by eliminating work commutes.

Though the time availability hypothesis predicts that remote-working fathers will perform more childcare than fathers who do not work remotely, pre-pandemic research is decidedly mixed on the association between remote work and fathers' performance of childcare (Carlson et al. 2021b; Chung 2022; Lyttelton et al. 2022; Diamond and Greenstein 2002; Noonan et al. 2007; Sullivan and Lewis 2001). Indeed, some research suggests that men who work remotely use their time to invest more in their jobs rather than contribute domestically (Sharpe et al. 2002).

Equivocal findings from past research on the association of remote work and fathers' childcare performance may stem from fathers' selection into remote work. If selection processes operated prior to the pandemic, pre-pandemic findings on the association of

remote work and fathers' childcare performance are likely biased. Though there is some evidence that mothers may select into remote work to increase time for childcare (Mas and Pallais 2017), the same is not necessarily true for fathers. Though some research shows that, controlling for gender, having small children is associated with a greater utilization of remote work (Thompson et al. 1999), several studies indicate that fathers who are inclined to use job flexibility for domestic reasons may be less inclined to utilize this benefit than men who use it to increase job productivity (Sharpe et al. 2002; Thompson et al. 1999).

Selection processes suggest that the association between fathers' remote work and their performance of childcare may have been underestimated in pre-pandemic studies. Prior to the pandemic, workplace flexibility was a fairly rare benefit, as only one in six workers was able to work from home (Galinsky et al. 2011). Additionally, the availability and utilization of remote work were weakly correlated, driven perhaps primarily by the stigmatization and penalties remote workers faced from employers and coworkers when they used flexibility for family reasons (Allen 2001; Blair-Loy and Wharton 2004; Munsch 2016; Thompson et al. 1999; Williams et al. 2013). Prior to the pandemic, remote working positions were concentrated in occupations and industries (e.g., management and business) where overwork was common (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Peters et al. 2008). The exogenous shock of COVID-19 lockdowns in forcing workers to work from home likely eliminated, or at least substantially reduced, issues of selection.

Another explanation for the equivocal findings is that the association between fathers' remote work and their performance of childcare is conditional and that this heterogeneity has been masked in past research, which only examines the general association between remote work and fathers' childcare responsibilities. Two factors in particular stand out as potential moderators—fathers' gender ideologies and mothers' paid work. Indeed, though remote work may increase fathers' available time to care for children, whether they use remote work to do so likely depends on their desires to engage in childcare and their partners' own time availability.

Like the time availability hypothesis, the gender ideology hypothesis is also widely employed by researchers to explain the division of labor in families (Davis and Greenstein 2009). The gender ideology hypothesis states that the division of labor in couples, and one's performance of childcare, depends on one's beliefs about gendered family roles (Stafford et al. 1977). Specifically, men with gender egalitarian ideologies are hypothesized to be more likely to engage in domestic labor and share it equally with their partners than men who adhere to gender conventions (e.g., men should be breadwinners and women should be homemakers). Research findings generally confirm this hypothesis (see Davis and Greenstein 2009) and demonstrate that men's gender ideologies tend to matter more for shaping the division of labor in families than women's attitudes (Carlson and Lynch 2013). Nonetheless, despite substantial increases in egalitarian gender ideologies among American men in recent decades (Scarborough et al. 2019), and in particular widespread desires among working fathers to be more engaged at home (Harrington et al. 2016; Petts 2022), men's shares of domestic labor have shifted only slightly. And though their shares of childcare have increased more than their performance of housework, mothers continue to perform the majority share of childcare (Bianchi et al. 2012). In considering the disconnect between ideology and behavior, fathers themselves point to the absence of supportive workplace policies as a key barrier to achieving their desires to be more involved at home (Harrington et al. 2016).

In "The Theory of Planned Behavior", Azjen (1991) writes that, although individual attitudes are a strong predictor of future action, one's attitudes are more likely to predict behavior when individuals perceive themselves to have control over their behavior; the stronger the perceived control, the more likely the individual is to follow through on a behavior. Regarding childcare, many fathers want to be more engaged with their children and job flexibility provides fathers with the ability to better control their time to follow through on their desires. But not all fathers have the opportunity or the desire to share equally in the care of their children. Indeed, while having both the opportunity and the

desire appears important to fathers' performance of childcare, the evidence reviewed above indicates that either alone may be insufficient to facilitate fathers' equal contributions to childcare. Rather, whether fathers' equally share childcare with their partners likely depends on having both the time and the will to do more.

While pre-pandemic studies explored how motivations for working from home were associated with fathers' performance of childcare (e.g., Carlson et al. 2021b), studies to date have yet to examine how fathers' gender beliefs shape these associations. Prior to the pandemic, workers espoused many different motivations for working from home, including using time at home to coordinate family needs, reducing costs of commuting, job mandates, or personal preferences (Carlson et al. 2021b). Fathers that worked from home for job-mandated reasons spent significantly less time in housework and childcare than those that chose to work from home for family-related reasons (Carlson et al. 2021b). Additionally, men who chose to work from home in order to achieve a work–family balance were more likely to increase their time spent in childcare than if they chose to work from home in order to complete more work after hours (Lyttelton et al. 2022. Motivations to "coordinate family needs" or "achieve work–family balance" do not, however, speak specifically to men's perspectives on their domestic or childcare responsibilities. When considering how one's orientation toward working from home may affect one's time in, and share of, domestic labor, research has yet to directly take fathers' gender ideologies into account.

Remote-working fathers with egalitarian views on gendered family roles likely feel a larger responsibility to contribute to childcare than remote-working fathers who do not desire an equal partnership (Kuo et al. 2018). For these men, especially those new to remote work during the pandemic, the opportunity to work from home may have finally provided them the chance to follow through on their beliefs. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. *The association between the fathers' frequency of remote work and fathers' childcare performance depends on fathers' egalitarian gender ideologies. The more strongly a father believes in gender equality, the stronger and more positive the association between their remote work and their performance of childcare.*

Though fathers' own time availability may lead them to spend more time in domestic labor, especially if they have gender egalitarian attitudes, this association may also depend on their partners' time availability. Indeed, when it comes to couples' domestic divisions of labor, time availability may function as a relative resource (Blair and Lichter 1991). That is, the partner with the most time relative to their significant other is likely to conduct a larger share of domestic tasks. Though fathers were more likely to be home during the pandemic, increasing their time availability, so too were mothers. Not only were mothers more likely to be out of the labor force before the pandemic, but female-dominated industries were also more affected by lockdowns than male-dominated industries, leading to higher rates of layoffs and furloughs for women (Qian and Fuller 2020). Additionally, remote work increased, leading more women to work from home (Brynjolfsson et al. 2020).

In general, mothers' employment narrows the time availability gap, making it more likely that fathers will perform more and a larger share of childcare. In different-gender partnerships where fathers are the sole earner, fathers' remote work may increase their time availability, but their female partners are still likely to have more available time overall, suggesting that fathers' increased time availability may have a weak effect, if any, on their performance of childcare. Given mothers' presence at home, sole-earning fathers' gender ideologies may also matter less in shaping how remote work is utilized. Indeed, research demonstrates that when mothers are present they may actually protect remote-working fathers' time and shield them from domestic labor (Calarco et al. 2021; Sullivan and Lewis 2001). In contrast, fathers' remote work in dual-earner families may substantially reduce differences in partners' relative time availability, leading to equal or more time availability for fathers compared to mothers. In these situations, what fathers believe about gendered

family roles is likely to be highly relevant to how they spend their time. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2a. *The associations of remote work with fathers' time and shares of childcare will be stronger for fathers in dual-earner couples than for fathers who are sole-earners.*

Hypothesis 2b. *The moderating effect of gender ideology for the association of remote work and fathers' time and shares of childcare will be stronger for dual-earner fathers than sole-earner fathers.*

3. Methods

3.1. Data

Data for this analysis came from Wave 1 of the Study on U.S. Parents' Divisions of Labor During COVID-19 (SPDLC). The SPDLC is a longitudinal survey of partnered U.S. parents that assesses changes in parents' divisions of domestic labor, divisions of paid labor, and well-being throughout and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Carlson and Petts 2022a).

Surveys for the SPDLC were administered via Prolific (www.prolific.co), an opt-in online platform designed to facilitate scientific research. The sample comprised U.S. adults who resided with a romantic partner and at least one biological child (at the time of entry into the study). SPDLC respondents answered questions about both themselves and their partners. Wave 1 of the SPDLC was conducted over a period of one week in mid-April 2020 during COVID-19 lockdowns in the United States. Though the majority of questions pertained to the respondents' current experiences and behaviors during this lockdown period, some questions were retrospective, assessing respondents' behaviors prior to start of the pandemic (i.e., early March).

3.2. Analytic Sample

The original SPDLC sample consisted of 1157 respondents. Men, Black individuals, individuals who did not complete college, and people who identified as politically conservative were oversampled to increase diversity. Due to the focus on fathers in this study, the sample was restricted to respondents who were fathers (mothers and respondents with missing data on gender were excluded; n = 696). We further excluded fathers who were not employed at the time of the survey (n = 67), fathers who did not have a child under the age of 18 years given that childcare questions were only asked to parents with children younger than 18 years old (n = 17), fathers in same-sex/same-gender partnerships (n = 23), and any cases with missing values on the variables of interest (n = 17). The final analytic sample for the study was n = 337 partnered fathers.

3.3. Measures

Childcare

The respondents were asked to report on the division of numerous domestic tasks between themselves and their partners (0 = I do it all, 1 = I do more of it, 2 = we share it equally, 3 = my partner does more of it, 4 = my partner does it all) both before and during the pandemic. Additionally, the respondents also reported on how their time, and their partners' time, in domestic tasks changed since the start of the pandemic (options of −2 = doing much less, −1 = doing somewhat less, 0 = no change, 1 = doing somewhat more, 2 = doing much more). Respondents were provided the option of reporting "N/A" for both themselves and/or their partner if they did not perform a task. A response of "N/A" was coded as missing.

Routine childcare tasks were the primary focus of this study. The respondents were asked to report on behavior specific to their youngest child. For the parents of pre-school-aged children (younger than the age of 6 years), the respondents reported on each of the following: physical care (e.g., bathing, feeding, and dressing), talking/listening to child, looking after child, putting child to bed, reading, playing, organizing, and enforcing rules. Parents of school-aged children (ages of 6–17 years) reported on talking/listening to

child, monitoring, attending events, reading, playing, organizing, enforcing rules, picking up/dropping off, and helping with homework.

Childcare was operationalized into two different variables: fathers' shares of childcare and change in childcare since the pandemic. For *fathers' shares of childcare during the pandemic* (April 2020), the responses to each childcare task were first recoded (to range from 0 = mother does it all to 4 = father does it all) and then averaged into a mean scale to indicate fathers' total shares of childcare. For *father's change in childcare*, the responses to each childcare task were also combined into a mean scale. We also controlled for *fathers' shares of childcare pre-pandemic* (March 2020) in all models to focus on changes to fathers' childcare during the pandemic (this variable was measured in the same way as the during the pandemic measure). For each measure of childcare, we calculated the mean scale for any respondent who provided a valid response on at least four childcare items, given that some childcare tasks became moot during the pandemic.

Because few fathers reported performing less childcare during the lockdown period (see Table 1), we also created a dummy variable—*father did more childcare*—such that fathers with scores 0.51 or higher on the change in childcare scale were ascribed a value of 1 (i.e., fathers who performed more childcare), whereas those with scale scores below 0.51 (i.e., fathers who reported no change in childcare or performing less childcare) were ascribed a value of zero.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Entire Sample		**Sole-Earner Fathers**		**Dual-Earner Fathers**	
Variable	**Mean/%**	**SD**	**Mean/%**	**SD**	**Mean/%**	**SD**
Father's Egalitarian Gender Ideology	4.045	0.689	3.900	0.705	4.156	0.657
Fathers' Share of Childcare Pre-Pandemic	1.739	0.523	1.598	0.599	1.847	0.427
Fathers' Share of Childcare Since the Pandemic	1.921	0.496	1.830	0.578	1.991	0.411
Father's Change in Childcare Since the Pandemic						
Performing Less	3.9%		4.1%		3.7%	
No Change	56.7%		50.7%		61.3%	
Performing More	39.5%		45.2%		35.1%	
Used Childcare Pre-Pandemic	27.0%		18.5%		33.5%	
Father's Frequency of Remote Work Since the Pandemic						
Does Not Work from Home	23.7%		28.8%		19.9%	
Works from Home Once per Month	0.9%		0.7%		1.0%	
Works from Home 1–3 Times per Month	0.3%		0.0%		0.5%	
Works from Home Once per Week	2.7%		0.7%		4.2%	
Works from Home More Than Once per Week	11.6%		12.3%		11.0%	
Works from Home Exclusively	60.8%		57.5%		63.4%	
Father's Frequency of Remote Work Pre-pandemic						
Did Not Work from Home	59.6%		63.7%		56.5%	
Worked from Home Once per Month	7.4%		11.0%		4.7%	
Worked from Home 1–3 Times per Month	8.9%		7.5%		9.9%	
Worked from Home Once per Week	9.2%		6.2%		11.5%	
Worked from Home More Than Once per Week	7.4%		7.5%		7.3%	
Worked from Home Exclusively	7.4%		4.1%		9.9%	
Partner's Work Status Since the Pandemic						
Partners' Paid Work Hours	33.209	11.310	---		33.209	11.310
Partner Does Not Work from Home	15.1%		---		26.7%	
Partner Voluntarily Decreased Paid Work Hours	8.0%		---		14.1%	
Partner Voluntarily Left Job	3.6%		8.2%		---	
Partner Lost Job Involuntarily	9.8%		19.2%		---	

Table 1. *Cont.*

	Entire Sample		Sole-Earner Fathers		Dual-Earner Fathers	
Variable	**Mean/%**	**SD**	**Mean/%**	**SD**	**Mean/%**	**SD**
Control Variables						
Father's Age	37.706	7.606	35.99	7.44	39.021	7.489
Partner's Age	35.433	6.409	33.58	5.58	36.853	6.648
Age of the Youngest Child	5.905	4.593	4.91	4.33	6.664	4.657
Number of Children in the Household	1.813	0.840	1.91	0.90	1.738	0.784
Married Partners	94.4%		94.5%		94.2%	
Household Income Pre-Pandemic	5.223	1.433	4.671	1.447	5.644	1.248
Father's Race						
Black	5.3%		4.1%		6.3%	
White	76.9%		82.9%		72.3%	
Other	7.5%		5.5%		8.9%	
Hispanic/Latinx	10.4%		7.5%		12.6%	
Race of Partner						
Black	3.6%		2.7%		4.2%	
White	77.2%		80.1%		74.9%	
Other	10.4%		10.3%		10.5%	
Hispanic/Latinx	8.9%		6.8%		10.5%	
Father's Education Level						
Some College or Less	14.6%		9.2%		13.2%	
Associate's Degree	7.4%		4.8%		9.4%	
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	78.0%		80.1%		76.4%	
Partner's Education Level						
Some College or Less	23.1%		31.5%		16.8%	
Associate's Degree	11.3%		12.3%		10.5%	
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	65.6%		56.2%		72.8%	

3.4. Gender Ideology

Father's egalitarian gender ideology is a mean scale of 6 questions adopted from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFHs) (Bumpass et al. 2017). The respondents were asked to report their level of agreement with six statements measuring different aspects of gender beliefs (1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Somewhat agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Somewhat disagree, 5 = Strongly disagree): (1) "Preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother is employed", (2) "It is OK for mothers to work full-time when their youngest child is under age 5", (3) "If a husband and wife both work full-time, they should share household tasks equally", (4) "Men and women should share equally in the raising of their children", (5) "Parents should encourage just as much independence in their daughters as their sons", and (6) "It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family". Items 2, 3, 4, and 5 were reverse-coded so that higher scores on each item indicate more egalitarian attitudes (alpha = 0.75).

3.5. Remote Work

The respondents were asked to report how often they and their partners worked from home both before the pandemic in early March 2020 and during the pandemic in April 2020. The response options included: 1 = Never, 2 = Once a month, 3 = 1–3 Times per month, 4 = Once a week, 5 = More than once a week, 6 = Exclusively. For the purposes of parsimony, *fathers' frequency of remote work* (both pre-pandemic in March 2020 and during lockdowns in April 2020) was treated as a continuous variable in statistical models. The supplemental analyses (not shown; available upon request), in which fathers' frequency of remote work was treated as a categorical variable (e.g., never; rarely; and primarily), indicated no clear cut-points in the frequency of remote work that were associated with more or less childcare among fathers, supporting the decision to treat fathers' frequency of remote work as a continuous variable.

3.6. Control Variables

The following variables were included in the models as the statistical controls: *age of youngest child* (in years), *number of kids in the household*, *age of father and partner* (in years), *education level of both father and partner* (some college or less, associate's degree, Bachelor's degree or higher) *household income* (ranging from 1 = less than USD 1000/month to 7 = USD 9000 or more/month; treated as continuous), *race/ethnicity of both father and partner* (Black, White, Latinx, and other), *marital status* (1 = married; 0 = cohabiting), and *the use of pre-pandemic childcare* (1 = yes). In models for dual-earning fathers, additional controls included: *partners' paid work hours*, whether a father's partner *voluntarily decreased paid work hours* due to COVID-19 (1 = yes), and *partners' remote work* status (1 = partner does not work from home). The partners who worked from home once a week or less were coded as not working from home. This cut-point was chosen since fewer than 5% of remote working partners were working from home once a week or less. Lastly, in models for sole-earning fathers, we controlled for whether the father's *partner involuntarily lost their job* during the pandemic (1 = yes) and whether they *left job voluntarily* (1 = yes)

3.7. Analytic Approach

We used OLS and binary logistic regression models to examine the association of fathers' remote work and fathers' changes in childcare since the pandemic, and OLS regression models to assess the association of fathers' remote work and fathers' shares of childcare during the pandemic. To assess the moderating role of fathers' gender ideologies, we included statistical interactions between fathers' gender ideologies and their frequency of remote work in the regression models. To consider whether the moderating effect of fathers' gender ideology varied between fathers in sole- and dual-earner partnerships, we conducted analyses separately for sole-earner fathers (whose partner was out of the labor force; n = 146) and fathers in dual-earner partnerships (n = 191). To ease the interpretation of the statistical interaction and component coefficients, both the frequency of remote work and fathers' gender ideologies were mean-centered using the group means for dual- and sole-earning fathers.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. As shown, remote work increased substantially among partnered fathers of minor children at the beginning of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, just 7% of employed fathers in the SPDLC worked from home exclusively. By mid-April 2020, however, this increased to 61% of employed fathers. Dual-earning fathers were twice as likely to exclusively work from home prior to the pandemic as sole-earning fathers (9.9% vs. 4.1%, respectively). All fathers became equally more likely to work from home exclusively in the early days of the pandemic; nonetheless, the gap between dual- and sole-earning fathers grew by only 1 percentage point by April 2020, from 5.8 points to 6.8 points (63.4% vs. 56.6%, respectively).

Although the majority (57%) of employed fathers reported no change in the amount of childcare they performed since the onset of the pandemic, 40% said they increased their time in childcare and only 4% of fathers reported less childcare. Sole-earning fathers (45.2%) were more likely than dual-earning fathers (35.1%) to increase their performance of childcare, but this is likely owed to the fact that they performed a smaller share of childcare, on average, pre-pandemic than dual-earning fathers (1.598 vs. 1.847, respectively). Consistent with the broad increase in fathers' childcare time, fathers' mean shares of childcare increased in the early days of the pandemic. In all, dual-earning fathers continued to perform a larger share of childcare compared to sole-earning fathers (1.991 vs. 1.830, respectively). As a score of 2 indicates that partners equally share childcare, the results show that dual-earning fathers and their partners appear to have shared childcare equally in the early days of the pandemic, on average.

Historically, fathers are more likely to participate in disciplinary and play-based childcare tasks compared to instrumental or management tasks (Raley et al. 2012). To examine

where fathers increased their shares of childcare, we conducted supplemental analyses using paired sample t-tests to examine changes from March to April 2020 by various tasks. As Table 2 indicates, fathers with young children under the age of 6 years reported increases in their shares of both traditionally male and traditionally female childcare tasks. Only enforcing rules and reading with children did not change. The change was most apparent in the traditionally female-dominated tasks of physical care and organizing/planning. A similar trend held for fathers of older children. These fathers increased their shares not only of play-based and monitoring tasks, but also instrumental tasks, such as organizing. Interestingly, though nearly all children were learning from home in Spring 2020, the fathers of these older school-aged children did not significantly change their shares of helping with homework, on average.

Table 2. Paired *t*-tests of the mean change in the fathers' shares of various childcare tasks from March 2020 to April 2020.

	Child under 6 Years of Age		Child 6–17 Years of Age	
Childcare Task	**Mean Change**	**SE**	**Mean Change**	**SE**
Talking/listening to child	0.154 **	0.051	0.238 ***	0.058
Looking after/monitoring child	0.185 **	0.058	0.269 ***	0.060
Organizing/planning for child	0.272 ***	0.056	0.134 *	0.060
Playing with child	0.180 ***	0.049	0.290 ***	0.054
Enforcing rules for child	0.006	0.041	0.103	0.058
Reading to/with child	0.080	0.048	0.210 **	0.071
Physical care of child	0.270 ***	0.054		
Putting child to bed	0.095 *	0.048		
Attending events for child			0.250 ***	0.069
Picking child up from school			0.264 **	0.088
Helping child with homework			0.126	0.070

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Changes in fathers' childcare participation during the pandemic may reflect not only increases in time availability due to increases in remote work, but also the possibility that fathers wanted to participate more in childcare. On average, fathers had a mean score of 4.05 (out of 5) on the egalitarian gender ideology scale, with a standard deviation of 0.69 (95% CI = 2.7–5.0), indicating that many fathers had egalitarian views, with dual-earning fathers exhibiting more egalitarian views than sole-earner fathers.

Fathers' Frequency of Remote Work and Changes in Their Performance of Childcare

Tables 3–6 present the results from the regression analyses of fathers' childcare performance during COVID-19, disaggregated by fathers' partners' work status. All models include controls, but for the sake of presentation, only the results for the main study variables are presented. The full results can be found in the Supplementary Materials. Model 1 of Table 3, which examines changes in fathers' performance of childcare during COVID-19, shows that the frequency of remote work is, on average, positively associated with changes in dual-earning fathers' childcare responsibilities (b = 0.054; $p < 0.05$). Interestingly, a greater frequency of remote work pre-pandemic is negatively associated with a change in dual-earning fathers' childcare during the pandemic. The negative coefficient indicates that decreases in childcare were steeper and/or increases less steep the more often dual-earning fathers worked from home prior to the pandemic. This suggests that changes in dual-earning fathers' time in childcare during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic were concentrated amongst fathers who were not working from home frequently before the pandemic began.

Table 3. OLS regression of fathers' change in childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

	Dual-Earner Father (n = 191)		Sole-Earner Father (n = 146)	
Variable	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
	b (se)	**b (se)**	**b (se)**	**b (se)**
Father's frequency of remote work	0.054 * (0.024)	0.055 * (0.024)	0.051 (0.028)	0.052 (0.028)
Father's egalitarian gender ideology	0.060 (0.064)	0.042 (0.063)	−0.098 (0.082)	−0.093 (0.084)
Fathers' frequency of remote work X Fathers' egalitarian gender ideology		0.088 * (0.034)		0.011 (0.035)
R^2	0.126	0.155	0.079	0.072

* $p < 0.05$.

Though time spent working from home is positively associated with change in dual-earning fathers' childcare performance, in general, the results from Model 2 support Hypothesis 1, as this association varies according to the father's egalitarian gender ideology. The model shows that, at the mean level of egalitarian gender ideology for dual-earning fathers, the association of the frequency of remote work and change in childcare performance is statistically significant (b = 0.055; $p < 0.05$). At the mean gender ideology, fathers exhibit somewhat, but not fully egalitarian attitudes, meaning that, although they adhere to some feminist ideals, those ideals may not be strong or may also be mixed with some more gender conventional attitudes. The positive interaction coefficient (b = 0.88; $p < 0.05$) in Model 2 shows that the association between remote work and change in fathers' childcare during COVID-19 becomes stronger as egalitarian gender ideology increases. In contrast to the results for dual-earning fathers, and consistent with Hypothesis 2a and 2b, the results of Models 3 and 4 of Table 3 show neither a statistically significant association between the sole-earning fathers' frequency of remote work and changes in their childcare performance during COVID-19 nor a moderating effect of gender ideology.

To assess the variation in dual-earning fathers' changes in childcare across gender ideology, we present predicted mean values in Table 4. We present the results for three values of gender ideology—neutral (score of 3.33), somewhat egalitarian (score of 4.16—the scale mean), and egalitarian (score of 5). The estimates are limited to gender ideology scores of 3.33 or higher as supplemental analyses (not shown; available upon request) indicate that less than 10% of dual-earning fathers have gender ideology scores less than 3.33. The mean values of change in childcare were calculated holding statistical controls at their means.

Table 4. Predicted mean values of change in the childcare scale by fathers' remote work and gender ideology.

	Frequency of Remote Work					
Fathers' Egalitarian Gender Ideology (GI)	**Never**	**Once a Month**	**1–3 Times per Month**	**Once a Week**	**More than Once a Week**	**Exclusively**
Neutral GI	0.39	0.38	0.36	0.34	0.32	0.31
Somewhat Egalitarian GI	0.16	0.21	0.27	0.32	0.38	0.43
Egalitarian GI	−0.08	0.04	0.17	0.30	0.43	0.56

As the table shows, only dual-earner fathers with the most egalitarian gender ideologies who work from home exclusively are predicted to perform more childcare (scale score of 0.51 or higher). For all other fathers, regardless of the frequency of remote work, the model predicts no change in childcare (scale score between −0.50 and +0.50).

To further examine whether remote work was associated with fathers performing more childcare during COVID-19, we conducted binary logistic regression analyses predicting fathers' odds of performing more childcare. The results in Models 1 and 2 of Table 5 indicate that the association between the frequency of remote work and dual-earning fathers' odds of performing more childcare varied depending on the fathers' gender ideologies. Model 1 shows no general association of remote work and dual-earning fathers' odds of performing more childcare. Yet, in line with Hypothesis 1, Model 2 shows that, as the egalitarian gender ideology increases, the association between the frequency of remote work and the odds of fathers' performing more childcare becomes stronger. Consistent with Table 3, the results indicate a significant association between the dual-earning fathers' frequency of remote work and the odds of performing more childcare at average levels of egalitarian gender ideology. This suggests that, among dual-earning fathers with somewhat egalitarian attitudes, working from home more frequently during COVID-19 increased the odds (odds ratio (OR) = 1.39; $p < 0.05$) that they would perform more childcare. Among those with egalitarian attitudes, the association between frequency of remote work and the odds of performing more childcare was considerably stronger (OR = 2.38; $p < 0.01$; not shown in table).

Table 5. Binary logistic regression of fathers' odds of performing more childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

	Dual-Earner Father (*n* = 191)				**Sole-Earner Father (*n* = 146)**			
Variable	**Model 1**		**Model 2**		**Model 3**		**Model 4**	
	b (se)	**OR**	**b (se)**	**OR**	**b (se)**	**OR**	**b (se)**	**OR**
Fathers' frequency of remote work	0.219 (0.116)	1.245	0.326 * (0.147)	1.385	0.333 ** (0.116)	1.395	0.331 ** (0.118)	1.393
Fathers' egalitarian gender ideology	−0.025 (0.307)	0.975	−0.372 (0.366)	0.689	−0.154 (0.332)	0.858	−0.154 (0.332)	0.857
Fathers' frequency of remote work X Fathers' egalitarian gender ideology			0.650 ** (0.242)	1.916			−0.013 (0.149)	0.987
Pseudo R^2	0.336		0.387		0.306		0.306	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$.

Models 3 and 4 show that the frequency of remote work was positively associated with sole-earning fathers' odds of performing more childcare (Model 3), and this was the case regardless of their gender ideologies (Model 4). The results therefore provide support for Hypothesis 2b, but only mixed support for Hypothesis 2a. On the one hand, sole-earning fathers had partners with more time availability, suggesting that the association of remote work and their odds of performing more childcare should be weaker than for dual-earning fathers. Yet, the association of the frequency of remote work and increased odds of performing more childcare (OR = 1.40; $p < 0.01$) was as a strong as it was for dual-earning fathers with somewhat egalitarian beliefs. On the other hand, the association for sole-earning fathers was not moderated by the fathers' gender ideologies and as weaker than for dual-earning fathers with egalitarian attitudes.

To help to illustrate group differences in the likelihood of performing more childcare, the log odds from Table 5 are plotted in Figure 1a,b as probabilities ($p_r = e^{(\log odds)} / (1 + e^{(\log odds)})$). The association of remote work and dual-earning fathers' probabilities of performing more childcare is presented in Figure 1a, while Figure 1b shows sole-earning fathers' probabilities of performing more childcare. The estimates in both figures were calculated holding all controls at their group mean values. For dual-earning fathers with neutral gender ideologies (score of 3.33), the frequency of remote work was statistically unassociated with the odds of performing more childcare early in the pandemic. For

these fathers, the probability of performing more childcare was low regardless of where they worked (9% probability if they never worked from home; 23% if they worked from home exclusively). In contrast, the odds of performing more childcare early in the pandemic varied substantially depending on the work location for dual-earning fathers with somewhat egalitarian (score of 4.16) and egalitarian (score of 5) gender ideologies. For those with somewhat egalitarian attitudes, which was typical of dual-earning fathers, the probability of performing more childcare was only 3% if they never worked from home. However, if they worked from home exclusively, these fathers had a 31% probability of performing more childcare. Though dual-earning fathers with egalitarian attitudes had the lowest odds of performing more childcare if they never worked from home, they had the highest probability of performing more childcare among dual-earning fathers if they worked from home exclusively (41%). As shown in Figure 1b, sole-earner fathers have the highest probability of performing more childcare when never working from home, though the probability is still incredibly low (12%), but the highest probability of performing more childcare among all fathers when working from home exclusively (43%).

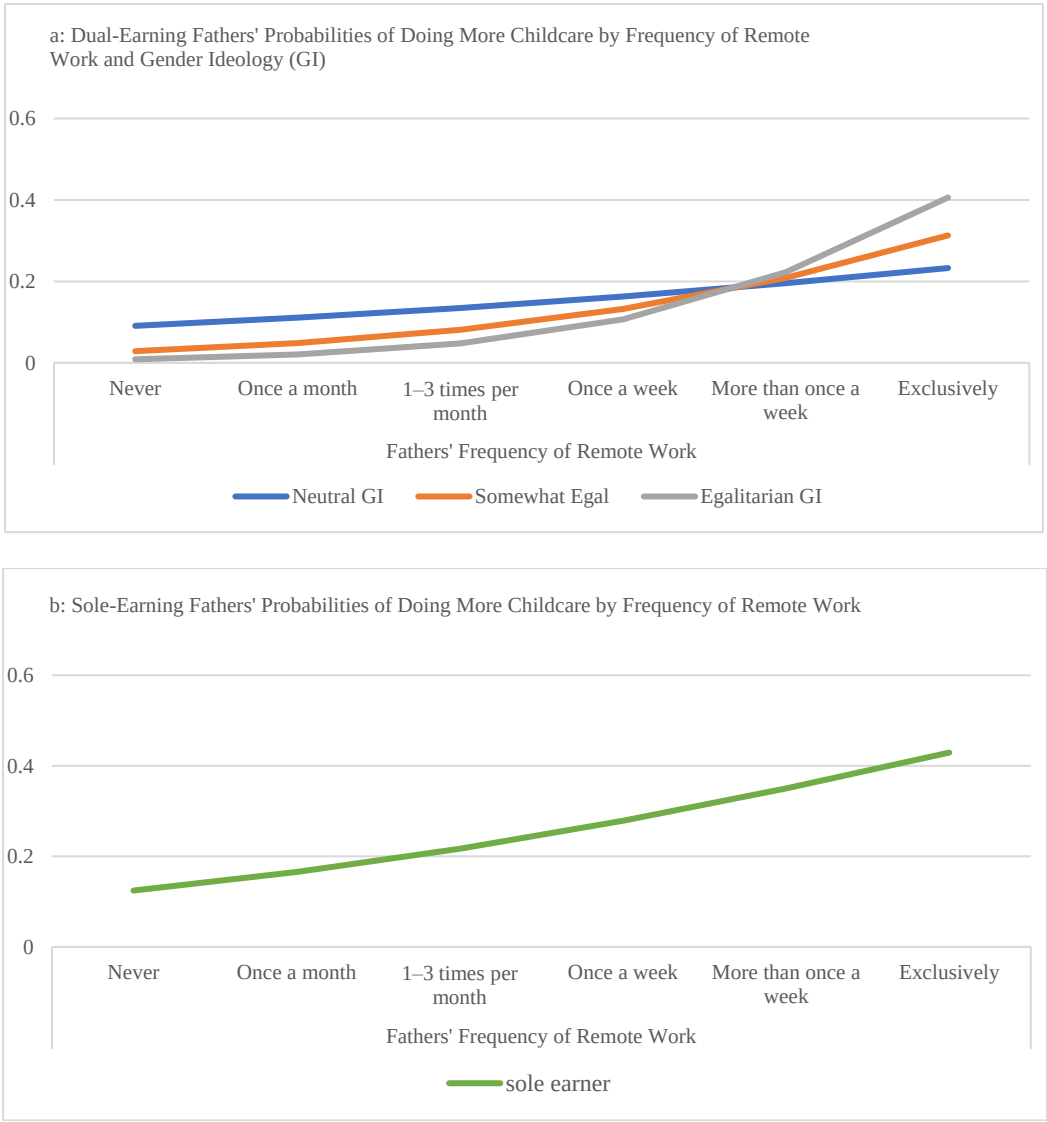

Figure 1. (**a**) Dual-earning fathers' probabilities of performing more childcare according to the frequency of remote work and gender ideology (GI). (**b**) Sole-earning fathers' probabilities of performing more childcare according to the frequency of remote work.

Though sole-earning fathers who worked from home exclusively were just as likely as dual-earning fathers with egalitarian attitudes to increase their time in childcare, sole-earning fathers performed a substantially smaller share of childcare in their families pre-pandemic than dual-earning fathers. To assess how increases in fathers' childcare performance relate to gender equality in childcare, Table 6 presents the results predicting fathers' shares of childcare during the pandemic. Similar to the results in Tables 3 and 5, and consistent with Hypothesis 1, Models 1 and 2 of Table 6 show that gender ideology moderates the association of the frequency of remote work and dual-earning fathers' shares of childcare and that the positive association of the frequency of remote work and a father's shares of childcare strengthens as gender ideology becomes more egalitarian. Models 3 and 4 show that the frequency of remote work among sole-earner fathers is associated with a significant increase in their shares of childcare (b = 0.41; $p < 0.05$), but this association does not vary according to a sole-earning father's gender ideology. Like analyses of changes in childcare, the findings provide support for Hypothesis 2b, but only mixed support for Hypothesis 2a.

Table 6. OLS regression of the fathers' shares of childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

	Dual-Earner Father (n = 191)		**Sole-Earner Father (n = 146)**	
Variable	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 3**	**Model 4**
	b (se)	**b (se)**	**b (se)**	**b (se)**
Father's frequency of remote work	0.025 (0.016)	0.026 (0.016)	0.041 * (0.019)	0.039 * (0.020)
Father's egalitarian gender ideology	0.018 (0.043)	0.007 (0.042)	−0.089 (0.057)	−0.096 (0.058)
Fathers' frequency of remote work X Fathers' egalitarian gender ideology		0.055 * (0.023)		−0.017 (0.025)
R^2	0.274	0.295	0.497	0.495

* $p < 0.05$.

The results from Table 6 are illustrated in Figure 2a (dual-earning fathers) and 2b (sole-earning fathers). Among dual-earning fathers, the association between remote work and their childcare shares is negative for those with neutral ideologies and slightly positive for those with somewhat egalitarian ideologies. Supplemental analyses indicate that neither of these associations are statistically significant, however. Among those with egalitarian beliefs, the association is positive and significant (b = 0.079; $p < 0.01$). Based on the model estimates, dual-earning fathers with egalitarian gender ideologies who worked from home exclusively performed a slight majority of childcare in their partnerships in the early days of the pandemic (2.08/4 = 0.52 or 52%). Moreover, their share of childcare was approximately ten percent greater than egalitarian-minded fathers who never worked from home in the early days of the pandemic (1.72/4 = 0.43 or 43%). Comparing Figure 2a to Figure 2b, the results show that, although remote work is associated with greater shares of childcare for sole-earning fathers, their shares are predicted to be lower than those of dual-earning fathers at all levels of remote work and gender ideology. Even when working from home exclusively, the model predicts that sole-earning fathers performed just 39% of the childcare in their partnerships in the early days of the pandemic (1.55/4 = 0.388).

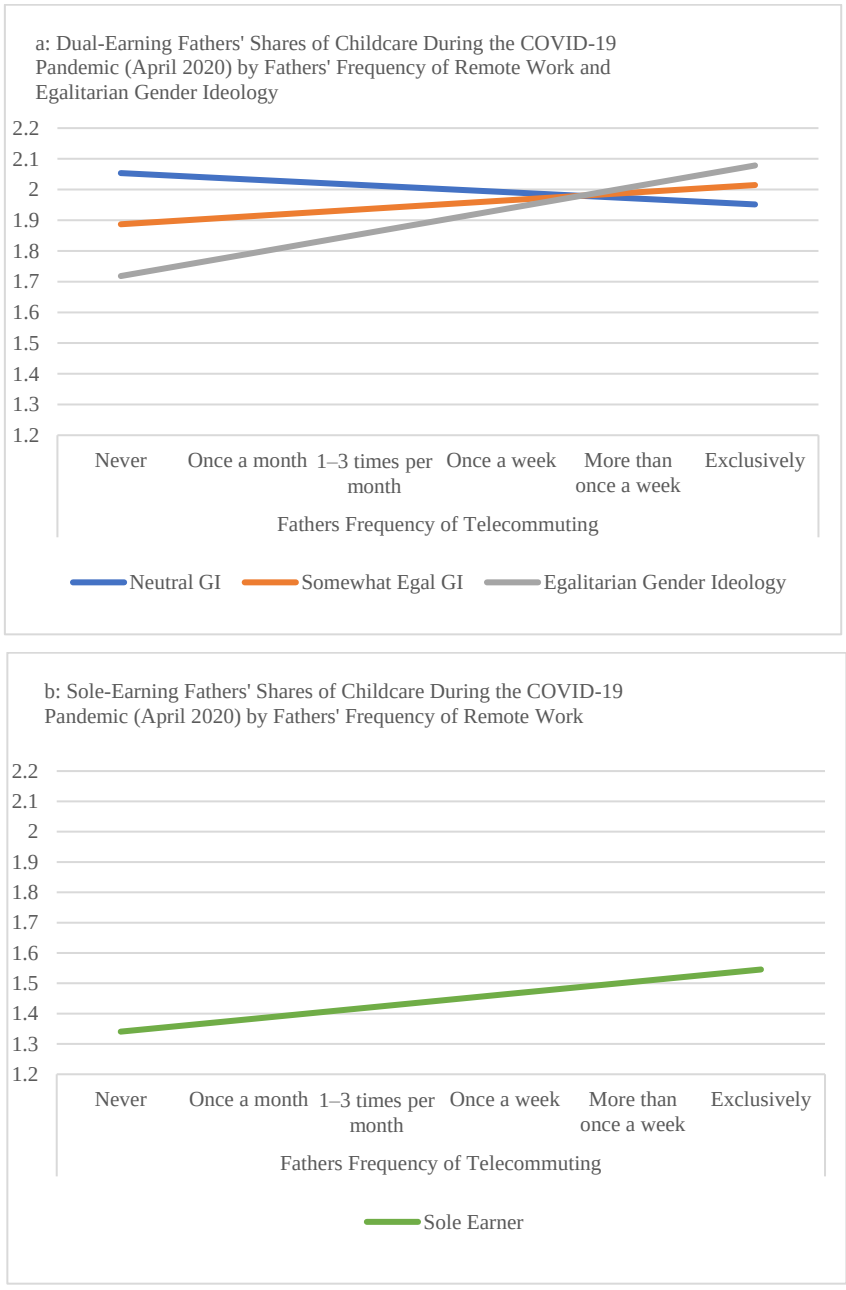

Figure 2. (**a**) Dual-earning fathers' shares of childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2020) according to the fathers' frequency of remote work and egalitarian gender ideology. (**b**) Sole-earning fathers' shares of childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2020) according to the fathers' frequency of remote work.

5. Discussion

The large-scale shift to remote work among fathers at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for parents to better balance work and family responsibilities, create more equitable divisions of childcare, and possibly help mothers to stay in their paid jobs. Whether fathers' increased time availability would lead to more childcare responsibilities, however, was debatable. Combining insights from the theory of reasoned action, the time availability hypothesis, and the gender ideology hypothesis, we argued that fathers' contributions to childcare during the pandemic likely required both the opportunity and the desire to act, while either alone may have been insufficient. As such, the move to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic should have been especially likely to increase fathers' childcare responsibilities among dual-earning fathers with gender egali-

tarian attitudes as they not only have the desire to do more but also the opportunity and need to do more given their own enhanced availability and the more limited availability of their partner.

The results from this study show that not only did fathers work from home more frequently during the early days of the pandemic, but they also increased their amount and share of childcare. Among working fathers, three in five worked exclusively from home during the early days of the pandemic, and more than 40% reported performing more childcare. Increases in fathers' time in childcare coincided with increases in their proportionate share of childcare, though on average, fathers' partners continued to shoulder the majority of childcare responsibilities early in the pandemic.

The results of this study provide support for the hypothesis that remote work would lead to the most childcare involvement among dual-earning fathers with egalitarian attitudes, though the results are not entirely consistent with the notion that fathers' childcare performance requires both the opportunity and desire to act. Dual-earning fathers with egalitarian attitudes who worked exclusively from home had a 41% probability of performing more childcare during the pandemic—the highest among dual-earning dads—and had a slightly more than equal share of childcare with their partners. In contrast, remote work was unassociated with childcare for dual-earning fathers with neutral ideologies and was positively associated with performing more childcare for those with somewhat egalitarian ideologies but not with their shares of childcare. This suggests that the partners of somewhat egalitarian fathers also increased their time in childcare, counteracting fathers' own increases.

For sole-earning fathers, remote work, and the time availability it provided, functioned as both an absolute and relative resource during the pandemic, leading to more time in, and shares of, childcare. Our hypotheses were partially supported in that the association of remote work with childcare was weaker for sole-earning fathers than dual-earning fathers with egalitarian ideologies and that sole-earning fathers' gender ideologies did not condition the association. Yet, sole-earning fathers' remote work was significantly associated with their childcare performance, whereas this was not the case for dual-earning fathers without egalitarian attitudes. Indeed, sole-earner fathers who worked from home exclusively had the highest probability of increasing their performance of childcare in the early days of the pandemic.

Though remote work appears to have led to more childcare responsibilities for sole-earning fathers, their overall shares of childcare were still lower than those of all dual-earning fathers, even those with neutral ideologies. This is likely due to the fact that, despite working from home, sole-earning fathers continued to have less time availability than their partners. Indeed, these fathers performed the lowest shares of childcare pre-pandemic and were also less likely to have been working remotely prior to the pandemic. Because sole-earning fathers performed the least amount of childcare prior to the pandemic, it was likely easier for them to perform more childcare, and working from home facilitated this. That remote work was associated with increases in sole-earing fathers' childcare regardless of their ideologies may be attributable to the massive increase in domestic labor in American homes due to social distancing-induced lockdowns. The sheer volume of childcare needed in homes, and the presence of sole-earner fathers, may have led fathers to take up a bit more of the domestic load just because there was so much to do. More remarkable, however, is that, despite owning a much larger share of childcare responsibilities in families prior to the pandemic, dual-earning fathers with egalitarian beliefs who worked from home exclusively were just as likely to perform more childcare during the pandemic as their sole-earning counterparts.

These findings are important because they highlight some of the factors that can lead to a more equal distribution of childcare in families. More time availability may increase fathers' time in, and shares of, childcare, but alone, it is insufficient to produce equal divisions of childcare. Rather, it must be paired with fathers' motivation to use their flexibility not just to increase work productivity but to be an equal partner. Without strong

beliefs in gender equality and the time to follow through on those beliefs, dual-earner families default to mothers' performing the majority of childcare. Yet, when fathers have both the time and the desire to contribute equally, the results here show that they do so. The time availability of mothers is also important to consider, as increases in fathers' time availability is associated with a more incremental increase toward an equal distribution of childcare when mothers are not employed.

How remote work is perceived moving forward also appears to be important for the future of gender equality in families. The pandemic created new opportunities to work remotely for millions of employed fathers. Whether those fathers had past access to remote work and did not use it for unknown reasons or they only gained access during pandemic lockdowns, this increased access was leveraged to perform more childcare, on the whole. Maintaining this access and/or fathers' comfort with, and acceptance in utilizing remote working options, will be central to fathers' contributions to childcare moving forward.

Although this study contributes to our understanding of the consequences of fathers' remote work during the pandemic as well as variations in how fathers used this increased flexibility, it is not without limitations. One limitation is the measure of gender ideology. First, there is much debate about gender ideology as a construct and the validity and reliability of measures designed to capture it (Davis and Greenstein 2009; Jacobs and Gerson 2016). Though this study uses a scale with acceptable reliability from a well-respected and oft-used national survey, it is not entirely clear that it captures fathers' attitudes about gender and parenting that are most salient to childcare. As such, this study may underestimate the salience of gender ideology for fathers' performance of childcare. Second, gender ideology was captured only at the onset of the pandemic. Though the survey was administered just weeks after the pandemic started, and though gender ideology is fairly static once adulthood is reached (Davis and Greenstein 2009), it is possible for it to change, and emerging research from the pandemic shows that gender ideologies may have actually become slightly more conventional as the pandemic endured (Rosenfeld and Tomiyama 2021). It is possible, though unlikely, that changing ideologies may have been a product of fathers' childcare participation early in the pandemic. Third, the respondents' partners' gender ideologies were not assessed in the SPDLC. Mothers' gender beliefs are important to understand as they could also influence fathers' childcare contributions and the distribution of childcare in couples. Mothers with more traditional views may have maintained primary childcare duties, whereas mothers with more egalitarian views may have advocated for fathers to perform more childcare. Still, research shows that men's ideologies are likely the most important in shaping the division of unpaid domestic labor in partnerships (see Carlson and Lynch 2013; Greenstein 1996).

In addition to measures of gender ideology, a modest sample size limited our ability to examine variations in mothers' work status (i.e., employed vs. not) and disaggregate by their remote work status. Variations in dual-earning fathers' childcare performance by both their own and their partners frequency of remote work should be explored in future research. Additionally, examining variations in sole-earner fathers' childcare contributions by whether their partners were voluntarily or involuntarily out of the labor force is also something future research should consider. Another limitation of this study is that the findings are based on fathers' self-reports of their own and their partners' childcare performance. Fathers tend to inflate their own and their partners time in domestic tasks (Yavorsky et al. 2015), and so, though their estimates of their shares of childcare may be unbiased, they may overstate the amount of childcare they perform and how much it increased during the pandemic. Studies of fathers' childcare using time-use data may provide more accurate estimates. Finally, because the SPDLC is an online opt-in survey, the results may be subject to some bias. Sampling bias is possible since those without regular access to a computer and internet may not have been able to participate. For instance, this sample has a higher number of respondents with advanced degrees than the average American population, and educational achievement may affect both gender ideology and the availability of remote work pre- and post-pandemic.

Understanding the relationships among gender ideology, remote work, and domestic labor is important for the future of work and gender equality. Remote work is here to stay, as more than 60% of people working from home during the pandemic reported wanting to continue working from home after the pandemic ended (Parker et al. 2022). Prior to the pandemic, flexible work arrangements, like remote work, were offered to a handful of workers, but not always utilized for fear of reprisal from employers and co-workers (Allen 2001; Munsch 2016; Williams et al. 2013). Parenting ideals are changing, with more partners expecting to equally share childcare and housework (Kuo et al. 2018; Davis and Greenstein 2009). In particular, the results from this study indicate that increased remote work among fathers during the early days of the pandemic is positively associated with performing more and a larger share of childcare, for egalitarian-minded fathers especially. The pandemic may have decreased the stigma around working from home for those that want to take on a larger share of domestic responsibilities and may continue to facilitate fathers' engagement in childcare post-pandemic. As the demographics of the workforce change, it is important that employers understand the kinds of policies and corporate cultures that employees desire—those that can support families and promote equality both at home and in the workplace.

Supplementary Materials: Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci13030166/s1, Table S1. OLS Regression of Fathers' Change in Childcare during COVID-19 Pandemic, Table S2. Binary Logistic Regression of Fathers' Odds of Doing More Childcare during COVID-19 Pandemic. Table S3. OLS Regression of Fathers' Shares of Childcare during COVID-19 Pandemic.

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A Case of Sticky Gender? Persistence and Change in the Division of Household Labor during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Michelle Cera [1,†], Golda Kaplan [1,*,†], Kathleen Gerson [1] and Barbara Risman [2]

[1] Department of Sociology, New York University, New York, NY 10012, USA; mc7579@nyu.edu (M.C.); kathleen.gerson@nyu.edu (K.G.)
[2] Department of Sociology, University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, IL 60607, USA; brisman@uic.edu
* Correspondence: gk1685@nyu.edu
† These authors contributed equally to this work.

Abstract: Contemporary research finds that gender continues to provide an organizing framework for couples' allocation of household labor. To explain this outcome, scholars focus on how structural arrangements and cultural beliefs contribute to the persistence of gender inequality in domestic labor. Yet scholarship has yet to fully clarify what combination of cultural and structural factors create persistent gender inequality in household labor. We use the COVID-19 pandemic as a naturally occurring event in which arrangements for childcare and work were upended, making it possible for many to rethink their household arrangements. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 81 respondents in heterosexual dual-earner couples, we examine how change in structural arrangements allowed some couples to develop a more egalitarian division of domestic labor. We also examine why an unequal division of labor persisted for most couples even amid the dramatic changes in their work and childcare arrangements and, for some, a strong desire to do so. We theorize that, taken alone, neither cultural attitudes nor shifts in the organization of work are sufficient to remove the stickiness of gender inequality in household work. Instead, structural change offers the possibility to change behavior, but only if cultural beliefs exist that make such change desirable.

Keywords: gender and work; COVID-19; caregiving

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1. Introduction

The pandemic upended the lives of Americans in many ways. Schools and offices closed; childcare centers shut down; many workers suddenly found themselves working at home while others had to decrease their hours or lost their jobs entirely; and many families were unable to leave their homes for months, producing isolation from friends and other relatives. Exposure to one or more of these sudden and unexpected changes represented an inescapable shock to American families' household dynamics. While devastating in many ways, the upending of taken-for-granted institutional arrangements also provided an opportunity for partners with children in the home to rethink their household dynamics and rearrange their daily patterns.

Given these institutional shifts, it is possible that new demands on parents made the achievement of gender inequality in the home more difficult, reinforcing or intensifying traditional divisions of labor (see Del Boca et al. 2020; Farré et al. 2020; Obioma et al. 2023). It is also possible that when parents, and especially fathers, found themselves spending more time at home, couples were able to more equally restructure the division of childcare, cooking, cleaning, and other domestic tasks. In our interviews with 81 individual parents in dual-earner, different-sex couples with children at home, little change took place for most of them. Instead, as couples navigated the challenges posed by shifts in their job requirements and childcare supports, almost ninety percent sustained the allocation of caregiving tasks that existed prior to the pandemic. This finding aligns with the work of other scholars, who have noted that mothers took on added domestic labor during the

pandemic (Calarco et al. 2020, 2021; Dunatchik et al. 2021) and that women's employment was significantly altered (Collins et al. 2021). Most mothers in our sample continued to do the vast majority of domestic labor even when fathers who had previously worked on-site were now at home.

Yet not all of our interviewees reported this outcome. A notable minority instead described household dynamics that shifted toward men's greater involvement in caregiving and couples' increased sharing of domestic work—a result that Petts et al. (2023) also find. To unravel the reasons for these divergent patterns, we use the destabilizing conditions brought on by the pandemic to uncover both the mechanisms that maintain and deepen domestic inequality and the conditions that can undermine it and encourage more equal sharing. We thus address the following questions: why and how did gender remain so sticky for most couples? And under what conditions did a small minority become more egalitarian?

2. Literature on Division of Domestic Labor and the Pandemic

Since the home is an important site for the reproduction and maintenance of gender inequality, scholars have long focused on the division of labor in the domestic sphere. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when much of social life became confined to the home, a unique opportunity arose for scholars to evaluate the domestic conditions and work arrangements that either reinforce or undermine the dynamics of gender inequality.

Gender scholars have extensively examined the influence of institutional factors on gender inequality in the domestic sphere. This research has emphasized the role of economic and political institutions in shaping gendered divisions of domestic labor. Folbre (2001, 2008, 2009) has argued that social institutions systematically undervalue care work (including household chores, emotional support, and childcare) and also that analytic frameworks fail to adequately acknowledge the economic worth of this labor. The fact that women tend to take on a disproportionate share of care work in both paid and unpaid domains both reflects and serves to reproduce gendered power dynamics. Connell (2014), among many others, has shown how occupational segregation and gender pay differences contribute to unequal divisions of labor in the home, including unequal decision-making power in the domestic sphere. Hochschild's (1989) influential work on the "second shift" also pointed to institutional factors such as inflexible jobs, men's long work hours, and women's lower earnings, although it emphasized the ways that beliefs—or "family myths"—contribute to the expectation that employed mothers will shoulder the heaviest burden of unpaid domestic labor. The previous literature has made clear that the organization of paid work, with its presumption that "ideal workers" (Acker 1990) have partners to care for their domestic lives, has shaped women's responsibility for caretaking and household labor in modern societies. As "gender structure" theory suggests, the material reality of paid jobs leaves women disadvantaged in both the labor force and the home. The organization of paid work encourages the presumption that men can expect partners to support their work participation by performing the domestic labor.

Scholars have also emphasized the importance of cultural factors in shaping the contours of gender inequality. Social norms, cultural expectations, and gendered ideologies contribute to gender inequality in domestic labor. In an early examination of the social position of the housewife, Oakley (1974) demonstrated how cultural expectations and stereotypes, such as the idea that domestic work is feminine, contribute to the unequal burden women assume at home. Half a century later, these beliefs persist. Butler (1990) has thus challenged essentialist views by arguing that ideologies, expectations, and norms actively shape the construction of gender, thereby perpetuating inequality across many domains, including the domestic sphere. And Schor (2010), among others, has pointed out how prevailing cultural ideologies surrounding productivity and economic growth ultimately undervalue non-market activities such as caregiving, suggesting that shifts in work-related norms could contribute to greater equity in the home.

Risman's multi-level theory of gender as a social structure (Risman 2018) helps to synthesize these classic views and, in doing so, also helps explain our findings. Risman argues that a gender structure can be found on the individual, interactional, and macro levels. At each level of analysis, moreover, both materialist and cultural factors are at play. At the individual level, for example, we all inhabit bodies that we use to present and claim a gender identity. We also hold internalized beliefs about ourselves as gendered actors that we use to guide our choices. At the interactional level, it is unclear if pandemic-related changes had notable consequences. While much of the research focusing on the interactional level focuses on "gender frames" (Ridgeway 2011) and "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987), there is no a priori reason to presume that the pandemic would change gendered expectations about domestic labor or caretaking. Indeed, there is no evidence that the pandemic prompted any societal shift that would undermine people's gendered sense of self or how they experienced their interactions with others.

At the macro level, however, the pandemic prompted dramatic changes in the organization of institutions across many domains. In a remarkably short period of time, employers distinguished between essential and non-essential workers as well as whose work could (and could not) be done on-screen at home during the workday. Similarly, in many states, day care centers and public schools were closed. Remote workers suddenly had the flexibility to participate in family labor, while at the same moment the rise of at-home schooling and loss of daycare substantially increased the amount of domestic labor and caretaking tasks left to parents. There is no reason to expect that the closed schools, day care centers, and workplaces would upend the cultural presumption that mothers are more skilled at nurturing and wives should be responsible for domestic labor. But there is reason to ask if and how the sudden and widespread changes at the macro level affected couple's gender division of labor.

Using this framework, we analyze what happens when dramatic shifts take place in the organization of paid work and domestic life. When, if at all, does such change induce husbands and fathers to increase their share of domestic labor and childcare when they found themselves at home with their families during the day? To do this, we divide our sample into three groups: parents who desired to move toward egalitarianism prior to the pandemic and did so, parents who desired to move towards egalitarianism and were unable to do so, and parents who did not desire a change and therefore made none. Our designations of egalitarian and unequal divisions at the baseline and during the pandemic are based on self-reports from one parent about how couples divided domestic tasks such as childcare, cooking, cleaning, and mental labor. If the interviewee reported that tasks were roughly divided equally, we characterized them as having an egalitarian division of labor. In cases where one partner described doing the majority of tasks, we characterized them as unequal. If interviewees described dissatisfaction with their division of labor or a desire to change their household arrangements, we categorized them as desiring change. In doing so, we ascertained whether or not parents desired a change as well as whether or not they were able to move toward it. In this way, we were able to examine how parents' aspirations interacted with their actual circumstances and locate the combination of factors that maintained inequality for most and allowed some parents to diminish it. While we recognize that self-reports represent perceptions rather than objective measures, they reflect the beliefs of those with whom we spoke and thus have real consequences in the lives of these participants.

We define changes in workplace arrangements (such as the rise of remote work and increased flexibility), time confined to home, and changes in childcare supports (such as daycare and school closures) as structural factors. For many interviewees, these changes were experienced as shifts in how and where they spent their time. In contrast, we define participants' expressed views, beliefs, values, and norms as cultural factors. With these distinctions in mind, we find that changes in institutional arrangements alone were not sufficient to explain why some were able to move toward more equality and others were not. Instead, prior beliefs and attitudes about gender and household labor set the stage

for whether or not a couple aspired to become more egalitarian. While many interviewees reported changes in their and their partner's work situations that could have facilitated more equal household dynamics, most continued to fall back on beliefs that mothers were better suited to doing most aspects of domestic labor and thus were not motivated to substantially change their division of tasks. In contrast, those participants who expressed dissatisfaction with their pre-pandemic division of labor were more inclined to hold egalitarian beliefs. The ability to achieve their aspirations, however, depended on how the pandemic rearranged their options at work and in the home.

We thus find that meaningful change toward more equal sharing occurred only when cultural beliefs aligned with institutional conditions. In most cases, changes in employment and childcare arrangements alone were not sufficient to spark change in the allocation of domestic labor. Structural shifts such as working from home, shifts in work hours, workplace flexibility, and daycare shutdowns did not, by themselves, produce more egalitarian patterns. Such a shift only happened when structural changes at the macro level allowed individual parents to enact egalitarian beliefs and aspirations they held prior to the pandemic.

Risman's conception of gender as a multi-dimensional structure provides an organizing framework for examining how the various levels of social life interact to produce specific forms of gender inequality. In the case of the pandemic, however, institutional shifts in the organization of work and family life have ambiguous implications for domestic inequality. The rise of remote work, on the one hand, led many fathers to spend more time at home, which in turn made it possible for them to increase their participation in caregiving and housework, thus reducing the gender gap. Yet the collapse of childcare supports and the rise of remote schooling increased the caregiving load for parents, which was more likely to leave mothers with more domestic responsibility and thus sustain or increase the gender gap. The question then arises: how did these cross-cutting institutional changes actually affect the division of domestic labor?

Given the significant changes that occurred in the organization of daily life during the COVID-19 pandemic, several scholars have examined how families navigated fluctuating work and household responsibilities. Dunatchik et al. (2021) found that, even as work, childcare, and schooling moved into the home in the early period of the pandemic, a gender gap remained as mothers continued to perform more domestic labor than their male partners. A number of studies have also reported that as the pandemic proceeded, much of the additional labor for schooling and childcare fell on women (Calarco et al. 2020; Carlson et al. 2020). In data collected in April of 2020, Carlson et al. (2020) found that while some families did develop more egalitarian arrangements, this group accounts for only about 10–15% of couples. On the whole, research indicates that although all parents were doing more domestic work, the gender gap remained as women continued to perform more domestic tasks and spend more time caring for children than their partners (Carlson et al. 2020; Ruppanner et al. 2021). Like Carlson et al. (2020), we find that a minority of couples did become more egalitarian and analyze what factors are correlated with such change.

Additionally, scholars have found gender differences in how changes in work conditions and the labor market affected couples' division of household labor. More women than men experienced a loss of employment, in part because women are over-represented in the kinds of jobs, such as service work, that disappeared during the pandemic (Yavorsky et al. 2021). Previous scholarship has found that when not employed, women and men both tend to take on more household labor, but non-employed women take on more domestic labor than non-employed men (Yavorsky et al. 2021). In interviews with mothers during the pandemic, Calarco et al. (2020) found that in families where men lost their jobs, mothers reported that their male partners still looked to them to manage most childcare tasks. Given women's added responsibilities for childcare and schooling, women were also more likely to work fewer hours and exit the workforce altogether (Landivar et al. 2020).

Yet despite the forces that sustained inequality for most different-sex couples, we know little about the combination of forces that facilitated change for some. Amid the significant changes that occurred in work and family life during the pandemic, our analysis thus seeks to unravel the factors that made it possible for a small group to close the gender gap and alleviate domestic inequality even as inequality persisted for others. Taking off from the framework of "gender as a social structure", we analyze the role of both structural and cultural factors and how they interacted to shape whether and, if so, how such factors affected the division of labor as reported by the parents we interviewed. We also analyze the ways that the pandemic held ambiguous implications for the gender gap in domestic labor. For most, the large and sudden increase in parenting responsibilities reinforced gendered inequalities. For a small but intrepid group, however, it provided an opportunity to enact pre-existing egalitarian aspirations that had been stymied by the demands of on-site work.

3. Methods

To understand how parents viewed their family's domestic arrangements prior to the pandemic and then trace how these arrangements and views unfolded as the pandemic proceeded, we conducted in-depth interviews with 81 dual-earner heterosexual parents with caretaking responsibilities. Since we only interviewed one member of each couple, the reported data represent that person's narrative. We thus analyze the interview material as an individual's rather than a couple's views. While we cannot—and do not—presume that partners would always agree, we were able to gather in-depth portraits of the experiences of both mothers and fathers prior to the pandemic and as they encountered and responded to changes in their work circumstances, division of labor at home, and views on their relationship with their partner and dependents.

Given the variability in working hours for many Americans throughout the pandemic, and the effects on work life for both full-time and part-time workers, our sample includes data on couples where both partners worked full time throughout the pandemic and those where one partner worked part time at some point.[1] Our sample was drawn from a larger interview study of 127 Americans regarding their experiences during the pandemic. Respondents were part of a nationally representative National Opinion Research Center (NORC) panel. Over 550 caregivers were contacted and those who agreed to participate were interviewed. Our subsample consists of 49 women and 32 men, with ages ranging from 23 to 59 years at the time of the interview. We excluded respondents in single-earner couples, where one partner was a "stay-at-home" parent (all of whom were mothers), since there was no reason to expect the pandemic would alter their domestic division of labor. We also excluded respondents who had caregiving responsibilities but did not report having children at home. Participants resided in a range of locations across the country (from rural areas to large cities), occupied a variety of socioeconomic statuses, claimed diverse racial backgrounds, possessed varying political views, and were rearing children ranging in age from infancy to adolescence. Additional information on our sample can be found in Appendix A.

Interviews were conducted between July of 2021 and January of 2022. They took place over Zoom and lasted between forty minutes and two and a half hours. We asked questions about participants' work and home lives from prior to the outset of the pandemic through the beginning and ensuing months up to and including the state of their work and home lives at the time of the interview. We elicited detailed responses that inquired not only about how, when, and who did such tasks as cooking, cleaning, and childcare but also how they viewed these patterns and how they developed as the pandemic proceeded. We also elicited detailed information about the work arrangements of the interviewees and their partners as well as their views on these arrangements.

Our data capture a limited timeline as well as a snapshot of participants' lives at any given point. Given the quickly evolving nature of work and family life during this time, we were unable to interview participants at the same moment in the pandemic's evolution.

We thus rely on retrospective accounts of their experiences from the moment the pandemic began up to the time of our interview. Yet despite this limitation, these retrospective reports trace the interaction of unfolding events and responses from the outset of the pandemic to the time of the interview. They provide a view of the process that evolved as once taken-for-granted institutional arrangements underwent unanticipated change.

We were also unable to analyze changes to different types of domestic labor, such as housework vs. childcare-related tasks, separately since the interviewees generally discussed their domestic tasks as an intertwined whole. While childcare and household chores are conceptually distinct, our interviewees did not typically make such distinctions. To the extent that participants perceived childcare and household chores as intertwined in practice, it was thus not useful—and would have been misleading—to artificially disentangle the two in our analysis.

Since these data consist of self-reports, we rely on the participants' descriptions of their own and their partner's contributions to household and caregiving labor as well as how they feel about their arrangements. Consistent with Gerson and Damaske's (2021) discussion of the nature of interview data, rather than assuming participants offer objective facts, their narratives gave us an opportunity to analyze the gendered and socially constructed meanings they shared and then place them in their appropriate social context. It is no surprise, for example, that women were more likely to report dissatisfaction or that most interviewees reported that mothers were responsible for a greater share of the household labor than fathers. It is also noteworthy that more men than women reported having an egalitarian division of labor and that men were also more likely to report both they and their partner were satisfied with this arrangement.

Given the gendered understandings and behavior regarding household labor (Cooper 2000, 2014), there is good reason to suspect that interviews with their partners might tell a different story, including one more likely to resemble the higher levels of dissatisfaction and desire for change expressed by the women we interviewed. In this sense, the narratives are clearly gendered. Yet our interviews with fathers (as well as mothers) involved considerable probing that delved beneath superficial or socially desirable responses to reveal far more granular details and nuanced information about how and why these differences exist.

It is also noteworthy that although our sample is drawn from a nationally representative and randomly sampled survey, the 81 respondents included in our analysis do not represent a random sample of this larger group. While our sample contains racial, ethnic, geographic, and educational diversity, it over-represents white college graduates compared to the broader U.S. population. As a result, it is not sufficiently diverse to explore differences among different racial, ethnic, regional, or educational groups. By interviewing a national sample of adults in depth, our data nevertheless provide insights about how and why the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the caregiving experiences and pathways of American parents in different ways.

4. Findings

What were parents' preferences for how to organize their domestic division of labor, and to what extent did the pandemic change that division? Like other studies, we found a stark gender difference in people's perceptions of their domestic arrangements at the outset of the pandemic, with 50 percent of men but only 12 percent of women describing an egalitarian division—a finding that replicates other findings that consistently show a large gender gap in women's and men's perceptions of domestic work (Cerrato and Cifre 2018; Kiger and Riley 1996; Young et al. 2015). We categorized couples as egalitarian if they explicitly noted that they and their partner split household labor evenly or described similar workloads when explaining which tasks they typically completed. We defined household labor as a combination of household and childcare-related tasks. Additionally, women and men who described their baseline arrangement as egalitarian were overwhelmingly likely to express satisfaction, with 94% of men and 100% of women in agreement. For this reason, the participants categorized as egalitarian fell overwhelmingly in the "did not desire

change" category. Although there were four cases in which an egalitarian interviewee nevertheless experienced change toward more equality, we included these cases in the "did not desire change" category since the change that occurred was neither expressly desired nor did it represent a substantial change in an already egalitarian set of ideals and domestic arrangements. As Figure 1 shows, we found a high level of dissatisfaction among those who entered the pandemic with unequal practices at home. Among the 59 participants who described an unequal division of domestic work, however, not only was the level of satisfaction much lower, but a large gender gap emerged. While 56 percent of men expressed satisfaction with an unequal division of labor, only 35 percent of women did so.

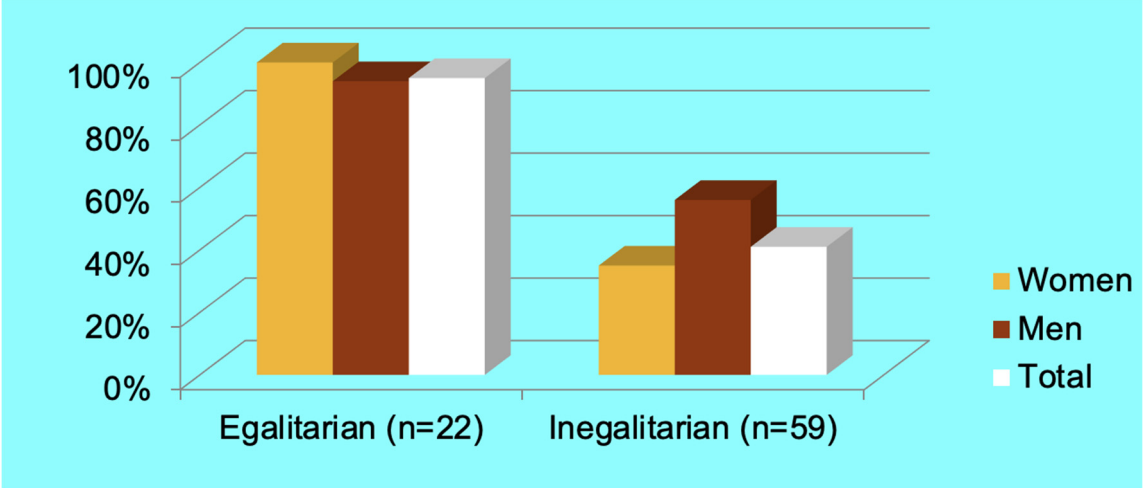

Figure 1. Percent Satisfied with Division of Domestic Labor among Dual-Earner Parents, by Gender & Perceived Division of Labor.

What happened to these arrangements as the pandemic proceeded? Did the loss of childcare support, coupled with changes in the location and demands of work, prompt changes in parents' domestic division of labor? In particular, did it allow parents with an unequal arrangement to reduce the gap between their desires and their pre-pandemic arrangements? And how did those parents who were able to move toward more equality compare with those who were unable to do so?

To answer these questions, we compare the parents who desired change toward more equality and achieved it with the parents who desired change but were unable to do so. Figure 2 shows the large gender differences in perception of change among parents with an unequal division at the pandemic's outset. Among men, 75 percent did not express a desire for change, while the remaining 25 percent who wished for change had contrasting pandemic experiences, with 12.5 percent moving toward equality and 12.5 percent unable to do so. Among mothers, while 43 percent did not express a desire for more equality, the remaining 57 percent were split between 10 percent who were able to achieve more equality and 47 percent who were not. We focus on those participants who expressed a desire for change and why this group experienced divergent pandemic outcomes, including the circumstances that kept most from achieving their desired change. We focus on desire for change because we want to unpack the ways that personal preferences interact with structural constraints and opportunities to either enable or prevent movement toward more egalitarian arrangements.

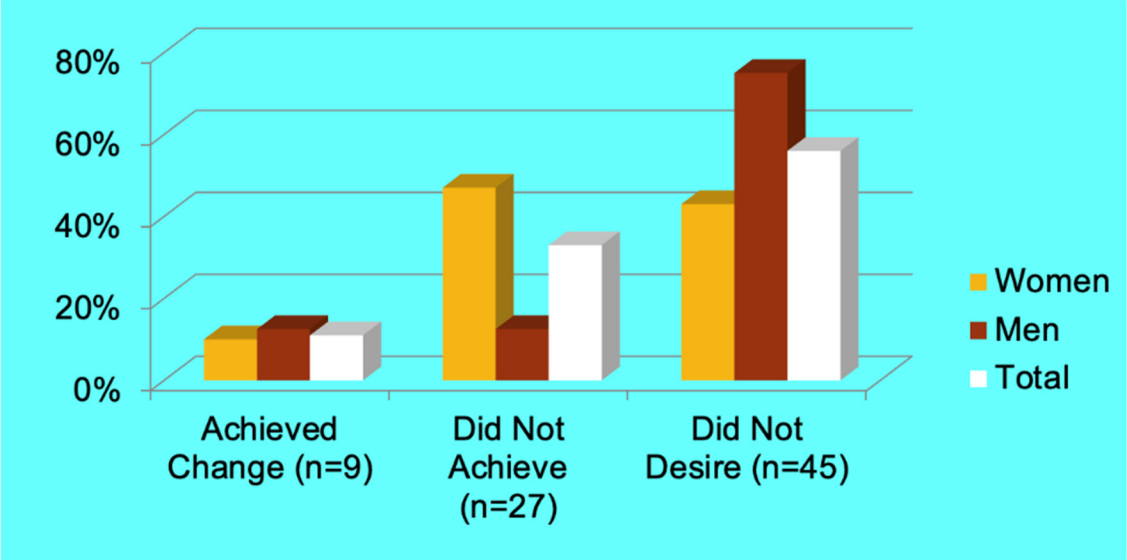

Figure 2. Percent Reporting Change in Division of Labor Among Dual-Earner Parents, by Gender and Pre-Pandemic Desire for Change.

Our sample of parents reported varying responses to the pandemic. A minority of interviewees experienced the crisis as an opportunity to revisit their domestic responsibilities and make substantial changes to achieve more equality. Others expressed the desire for change but were unable to achieve it. And some—including parents who described both equal and unequal arrangements—did not express a desire for change and therefore did not seek it.

Given the disruptions they faced, it is worth noting that many parents maintained an arrangement they found satisfying. Among those with unequal arrangements who reported a desire for change, only a minority were able to move toward equality. Amid the loss of childcare supports and the shifts in work locations and schedules, we examine the institutional and cultural factors that prevented so many parents from closing the gap between their preferences and their domestic division and compare their experiences with those of parents who were able to close that gap and move toward more equal sharing.

4.1. Parents Who Desired Change and Achieved It

Although only 11 percent (N = 9) of parents reported movement toward more domestic equality, their experiences reveal the ways that institutional supports can combine with cultural beliefs to make this possible. Among the five women and four men who were able to enact a preference for more equal sharing, structural changes such as a shift to working at home or on a different work schedule, combined with cultural factors such as beliefs in the value of equality, prompted more domestic sharing.

First, the pandemic brought about various changes in the organization of paid labor. Many parents began to work from home; some reduced their work hours or lost their jobs entirely; some took time off work; and some experienced changes to workplace flexibility. Christine, a thirty-year-old woman with three young children, described how her husband's shift from on-site to remote work sparked changes to his participation at home. Pete had previously worked in-person and full time at a real estate company, but according to Christine, the pandemic led him to be at home 90% of the time. Christine lamented that before the pandemic began, Pete enjoyed career advancement while she sacrificed both career opportunities and the respect of her peers in order to take care of their home and children:

> *As soon as I saw that it became a little bit more of Pete really going off and satisfying a lot of things professionally, that was really hard for me. I was like 'Oh, my goodness, I don't have my masters, I'm now viewed as a stay-at-home mom, my opinion doesn't matter,*

> *nobody wants to listen to me, I have no letters after the end of my name'. I didn't like it, so that was a huge conversation with Pete, and I said, 'I don't want this life, I don't want to be putting dinner on the table at four, I'm going to need so much more than this'.*

Christine felt stuck at home, frustrated by her domestic load, and unable to pursue professional growth. Prior to the pandemic, she had agreed to take a part-time job in human resources to accommodate her children's caregiving needs. The pandemic prompted a re-evaluation of her commitments to both work and caregiving: "I feel like our perspective did change for the positive in some way [during the pandemic]. I think that a lot of our relationships were strengthened because we could take different opportunities in the household". The pandemic allowed her to reevaluate the family's allocation of both domestic and paid work and strengthened her desire for change.

In addition to the change in Christine's outlook, her husband's shift to remote work made it possible for him to take on additional domestic tasks. Working from home afforded him the chance to assume responsibility for tasks that had been assigned to Christine, which sparked her appreciation but also reinforced her sense that more equal sharing was better for everyone: "I like it. I like seeing how much I don't have to do things. I like being able to look at a pile of dishes and know that, no, those aren't mine. Somebody else is gonna get those today". This combination of Pete's shift to remote work and Christine's views about who should do what at home converged to create a reinforcing process that allowed her to seek and achieve a more satisfying division of domestic labor. The structural changes enabled the couple to change their division of labor to more fully embody their egalitarian beliefs, or at least Christine's egalitarian beliefs.

In other cases, a woman's shift to remote work set the stage for change. Iris, a forty-year-old woman who lives with her husband and one young child in urban Missouri, was working in-person before the pandemic began at a management job at a local hospital that took up about 60 h of her week. In March 2020, her job became entirely remote and required fewer hours. Her husband was already working mostly at home as a freelancer who would occasionally work part-time selling baseball cards. Despite the fact that Iris held a demanding on-site job and her husband worked at home part time, Iris did the vast majority of childcare, cooking, and cleaning prior to the pandemic. It is not surprising that this arrangement created tension and began to impact her mental health: "It was overwhelming at times. . .There was definitely some resentment that built up. . .And we went to counseling, actually, because of that. Because it was very much a situation where I sort of felt like I was doing everything."

Iris's dissatisfaction led her to push for more equal sharing well before the pandemic began. Yet her efforts were met with little success until the pandemic required her to work at home and for fewer hours. Iris explained that being home made it possible to make specific requests that shifted tasks that had been invisible to her husband:

> *What has changed is that now that I'm here, I can actually say, 'Hey, honey, can you unload the dishwasher?' Or 'Honey, can you load the dishwasher?' Or, you know, 'Can you go do this?' Or, 'Hey, we need stuff from the store? Here's the list, can you go take care of this?' As opposed to me going to the grocery store, like on my way home from work. Because there is no 'on my way home from work' anymore. . .And so in that way, he is probably doing, we're probably more equitable in terms of the division of labor.*

Iris's presence at home allowed her to initiate more meaningful conversations about their division of labor that prompted her husband to do tasks she would otherwise have done. Although a desire for more equality preceded the pandemic, the change in her work arrangements made it possible to enforce them. It may seem counterintuitive that a mother's shift to working at home would spark more domestic equality, but Iris's experience demonstrates the power of unexpected changes in the organization of work to spark a re-evaluation of ongoing practices and make it possible to enact new ones. Their division of labor moved toward a more egalitarian one, but Iris clearly continued to shoulder more of the overall load, especially the cognitive work of keeping track of all of the tasks that need to be done.

Sean and his wife Morgan were also able to move toward a more egalitarian division of labor during the pandemic. As of November of 2021, Sean was working on his PhD and was a student housing director at a public university in the South. He told us Morgan was working as the Dean of Undergraduates at a liberal arts college close by. Although Sean and Morgan had to work from home for a few months at the beginning of the pandemic, both went back to in-person work by September of 2020. Interestingly, Morgan's work hours *increased* during the pandemic, as she was promoted in August of 2021. She would often be in her office late into the evening, leaving Sean to take care of their thirteen-month-old daughter.

Prior to the pandemic, Morgan had done much of their household tasks. Sean described their division of labor pre-pandemic: "My wife did all of the cooking. It's not because we believe in gender, like stereotypical gender roles or gender norms. It's a skill-based decision. I admit that I could cook, but she is good. . .but so she used to do cleaning". He then described how Morgan would do most of their laundry pre-pandemic because she wanted it done in a particular way. Sean understood their division to be based on preferences and skills.

However, when the pandemic hit and Morgan began to work longer hours and be away from their home more frequently, Sean took on what he described as the majority of childcare and household tasks. He mentioned: "I do 97 percent of the cooking now. . .so I took over all the cooking and then I took over a lot of dishes because if she is feeding the child and providing for the child, then the least I can do is clean up the mess. . .I had to start stepping up a little bit more". Sean's reaction underscores how institutional and ideological factors work in concert to create change. His reported egalitarian beliefs are put into action following significant changes to Morgan's work arrangements and time availability. Parents' time availability may only become a factor in their division of labor if their gender ideology is egalitarian.

In some cases, changes in work-family organization sparked changes in beliefs and preferences. In other cases, pandemic changes made it easier to enact pre-existing preferences. Whatever the time order, a shift in the practical organization of work allowed these parents to enact a set of practices that more closely resembled their desires. As the following cases demonstrate, these moves toward more egalitarian practices may not have occurred without this convergence of organizational and ideological factors.

4.2. Parents Who Desired Change but Were "Stuck" in Pre-Existing Arrangements

In contrast to the couples who were able to shrink—if not close—their gender gap, most of those who desired change (33 percent of our sample) did not report a shift to more egalitarian practices. These parents, which include 23 mothers and 4 fathers, also experienced noteworthy changes in their daily routines, including shifting to remote work, losing access to childcare, and shifting from time with friends and co-workers to time with family members. Yet, even when dramatic changes in the organization of their daily lives provided a major stimulus toward reconsidering taken-for-granted patterns and practices, in many families these changes did not prompt shifts in the allocation of domestic responsibilities. Despite an expressed desire, the persistence of beliefs that women should be primarily responsible for caregiving and housework prevented them from taking advantage of the opportunities that being home together created.

As Figure 2 shows, there are large gender differences in the interviewees who desired but did not achieve change. Many more women expressed dissatisfaction with their division of household labor prior to the pandemic, routinely describing their domestic responsibilities as overwhelming and exhausting. While 57 percent of the women in our sample claimed some dissatisfaction, only 25 percent of the men expressed a desire for change. In addition, women and men tended to desire different types of change. Women largely wished for more help from their partners with cooking, cleaning, childcare, and/or mental labor. Some explicitly expressed their frustration that being a woman left

them disproportionately responsible. Shirley, a 52-year-old mother of two, described her frustration that her husband did not know how to complete basic household chores:

> *I hate it. I tell my daughter, 'Just do me a favor. When you find somebody that you're going to get married, make sure you pick somebody who's lived on their own for a while'. Because my husband did not. Went right from his parents' house to us being together, and so his mom did all the laundry, his mom did all the cooking. His mom would do the clothes, as soon as it came out.*

Men, in contrast, were more likely to cite the wish to change their work schedules and responsibilities so that they could spend more time with their children. Mark, a 43-year-old father of one, focused on the limitations imposed by his employer, emphasizing that more time off from work would allow him additional time with his child. "I don't mind doing those things [household chores], but it wouldn't hurt to spend some more time with my son. I usually get home so late I'm pretty much too tired to do anything. . .I would like to have little more time off. But that's not practical".

Kevin described a similar desire. Kevin continued to work as an administrator at a small college, while his wife, Melanie, took a year off from work to supervise their children's remote schooling. While Kevin did not view this arrangement as ideal, he concluded that his need to work and the on-site requirements of his job put more equal sharing at home out of reach: "With three of them learning, we had one who was hybrid, two that were remote all the time. So it was a lot to figure out. And then I had to go to the office. It could have been different if I was working from home, she could have worked. But, yeah, didn't make sense". He focused on the constraints of his job rather than his own or his wife's frustration with how they decided to divide paid and domestic work. The structure of Kevin's job meant no other arrangements "made sense" even if he and Melanie preferred more egalitarian caregiving.

Dissatisfied women, in contrast, were more likely to view their partner's lack of initiative as the major barrier to enacting change. Many described partners who were willing to complete tasks, but only if asked—a dynamic that left them feeling wholly responsible for ensuring that domestic tasks were completed even if someone else was doing it. Although they wished for more domestic equality, they concluded that the mental labor required to delegate tasks would only add to their responsibilities while remaining largely invisible and unappreciated. Given this expectation, they were reluctant to ask for a more equal division even when the demands of childcare rose and both parents were spending more time at home.

Janelle and Tony exemplify the challenge of achieving more domestic sharing even when changes in work locations and schedules made that a more viable option. With six children, ranging in age from 11 to 25, Janelle and Tony grappled with caring for a large family while they both worked at schools in the same district. When their jobs became remote, their daily practices and schedules changed dramatically. Yet Janelle continued to do considerably more of the domestic tasks even though they were both at home with their younger children. Especially when it came to childcare, Tony resisted taking the initiative. As she put it: "If I say just make some eggs for the kids, he'll do it. He's willing to, but he doesn't do it voluntarily". Describing an organized meal planning system in which she lists recipes and ingredients on a dry erase board on her refrigerator, she explained how this effort illustrated Tony's resistance to performing any of the mental labor: "If I'm ever going to be gone, I can tell my husband just look on the fridge and if there's something easy that you want to make, or otherwise he'll make pancakes". Despite identical shifts in their work arrangements, neither Janelle nor Tony considered new ways of organizing their domestic lives. They continued to view Janelle as primarily responsible for running their household and Tony as the fallback when she was not available. While structural conditions changed, their pre-existing views and interpersonal dynamics inhibited change.

Connie, a 33-year-old mother of a six-year-old, also expressed a desire for her husband to take more initiative at home. As she declared: "I always wanted him to take more initiative. Instead of me having to tell him what to do, I felt like he should be able to see

what he needed to do". If Connie felt this way prior to the pandemic, when she was not employed, it intensified when she began a job as a classroom aide in November of 2020. From the beginning of the pandemic, her husband, Kenny, worked long hours as a hospital lab scientist, but he had recently shifted to a new job with a less grueling schedule at another hospital. While these changes left Connie with less time at home, she nevertheless retained the lion's share of the domestic burden and remained responsible for delegating any tasks she was unable to perform. Connie thus explained that "I just tell him what to do, and he doesn't always love having that 'to do' list", and then described her response to this as "Well, then do something so I wouldn't have to give it to you!" Contextual conditions may have made it both fairer and more feasible to move toward the more equal arrangement Connie preferred, but her husband, Kenny, drew on persisting beliefs about gender differences to resist changes at home even amid major changes in their obligations outside the home.

It is worth noting that Connie and Kenny share similarities with Sean and Morgan, a couple who experienced a shift to more egalitarian arrangements. In both cases, the wives experienced an increase in their working hours. The difference is that Sean had never been invested in continuing a gendered division of labor and was prepared to step up when Morgan's work hours increased, while Connie believed Kenny had never been bothered by his lack of initiative and was thus not prepared to change. Already existing egalitarian views left Sean and Morgan ready for change, while Kenny's disinterest left Connie stuck in an arrangement she found frustrating and unfair.

Renee also pointed to the difficulty of changing assumptions about who should be responsible, especially for the mental labor. Having grown up with a mother who did not work at a paid job and a father who rarely participated in household labor, she had made clear throughout her marriage that she did not wish to recreate this dynamic. Yet despite this desire, her husband left her responsible for doing the mental planning—a responsibility that Renee believed had prevented her from fully realizing her ideals:

> *He operates on the philosophy of "you just have to ask". Yeah, but I've been thinking about all the stuff that I have to ask. Like, you're not even using mental capacity to think about it. So I think the mental load is never going to be equal.*

Faced with her husband's intransigence, Renee wondered whether to attribute her situation to his personality or to men in general. In either case, her partner's beliefs and assumptions created an insurmountable barrier to achieving more equality: "I don't even want to say men and generalize it, but that's just not how he is. Just as a woman and a man, the mental load will never, never [be] quite equal". In cases like these, women who expressed distaste for traditional gender norms and the pressures they felt to uphold them were nevertheless unable to overcome their partners' ideological assumptions. The mismatch between their own and their partner's views created a dynamic that prevented them from enacting the changes they desired. Even though they valued equality, they made little progress if their partners did not agree.

Ally, a 34-year-old mother of three, expressed frustration that gender provided the framework for dividing unpaid labor with her partner, Ruben: "I despise gender roles, but that's all I know, honestly. It's how I was brought up and I just think somebody has to do it. I maintain the house". When, in March of 2020, Ruben took a leave from his job at a warehouse to avoid contracting COVID-19 and passing it on to their asthmatic daughter, her view did not change. While he did not work for six months, Ally transitioned from a temporary job while finishing her master's degree to a full-time remote position that required additional hours and provided increased income. Despite this reversal in their work commitments, Ally recounted that Ruben did a bit more household labor, such as supervising remote schooling, the overall division of labor remained largely unequal. She attributed the lack of change to beliefs they have both held since childhood. She explained, "It's a cultural thing, too—women cook, clean, take care of the kids, and the man works. I don't like it, but I don't know how to change it, when culturally that's how both of our families are". Amid structural changes in their work responsibilities that increased Ally's

professional responsibilities and prestige, gender still operates at the interactional level here. Ally acknowledges that she and her husband hold cultural beliefs regarding gender that prevent further change regardless of these changes to their structural conditions.

While daily routines of work and childcare may have shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of those who preferred a more equitable division of domestic labor encountered ideological barriers to initiating their desired changes. Unsurprisingly, women were far more likely than men to want to reduce their responsibility for managing and completing domestic tasks. Yet those women whose relationships relied on a traditional view about who should do what in the household were unlikely to reallocate responsibilities for domestic tasks despite any changes that took place in their work and caregiving locations and demands. Even when a woman held an egalitarian view, moreover, her partner's reluctance to endorse this outlook typically prevented a move toward equality. In contrast, among couples who shared a belief in the value of equality, contextual changes that supported a realignment were likely to prompt realignments that would shrink the gender gap.

4.3. Parents Who Did Not Desire Change

Over half (55 percent) of our sample expressed no desire to change the division of domestic labor prior to the outset of the pandemic. And despite the new demands brought on by taking care of children while also working at home, their division remained largely unchanged. Many reported they had not considered the possibility of change, often repeating phrases such as "this is how it has always been done", "it has always worked for us", and "that's just how we are". While close to half of this group (47 percent) reported they already enjoyed a generally equal arrangement, slightly more than half expressed satisfaction with a clearly unequal division. These parents divided tasks such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning unequally before the pandemic began and continued to do so during it. Although they did not share a similar level of frustration with their peers who wished to close the gender gap, this group reveals how and why gender, rather than the social contexts and demands of work and caregiving, continues to provide the organizing framework that most couples use to allocate domestic labor.

Just as the convergence of cultural *and* institutional factors allowed some parents to move toward a more equal arrangement, this convergence also supported the maintenance of an unequal division for those who preferred to do so. Noah, a thirty-seven-year old man who lives with his partner and three young daughters in suburban Ohio, spoke at length about his belief that a gender-traditional division of working and caregiving is always superior. Although his wife works part time, he was convinced their work schedules and natural inclinations were best suited for an unequal division. Pointing to his work schedule and belief that she was better suited to be the designated caregiver, he described their set-up prior to the pandemic with pride: "My wife is the primary caregiver for my kids. I went to work every day, and she's at home with them". When the pandemic upended others' lives, Noah and his family did not experience similar changes. Even though he began working from home and his wife continued to work part time, she also continued to do the bulk of the childcare and housework. When asked how he felt about the lack of change at home, Noah responded: "I think our house works great the way it is. . .I think everything unfolded the best it could. There's nothing we could have done differently".

Noah and his family exemplify the experiences of the many parents who continued to use gender as their organizing framework even when their work and family contexts changed dramatically. He never questioned whether he should be the family breadwinner who needed to give full attention to work and whose career overshadowed his wife's part-time work. As a result, he saw no need to stray from the path they had created. He adopted an "it is what it is" outlook that encouraged inertia and reinforced his previously held ideas. Like other couples who kept moving along an already established path, the rise of remote work and the loss of childcare support did not overcome deeply entrenched beliefs that a woman should be a household's primary caregiver and a man its primary

breadwinner. And although we cannot know what his wife would have said, his preference for a traditional gender division of labor echoes reports of men's resistance to change among the women who wished for more equality but were unable to achieve it. In the absence of change in such beliefs, the pandemic did not undermine already established unequal patterns.

Some couples experienced work changes so significant that they could have easily prompted changes at home. Robert, who lived in the suburbs of North Carolina with his wife and children who were three and five years old, mentioned that his wife "has always been the heavy lifter when it comes to those types of responsibilities". When the pandemic hit, both Robert's job in finance and his wife's work as a marketing manager became completely remote. With no timeline for returning to his office, Robert's newfound time at home could have prompted a rearrangement of their household responsibilities, but he was adamant that nothing needed to change. He explained: "The cooking, cleaning, things of that nature, I would say volume increased, but no changes to responsibilities. Overall, you could picture us as not being impacted by COVID in that sense".

Robert acknowledged that the work necessary to maintain the household had increased and his wife's contributions became visible and tangible. And he also recognized that this development might have set the stage for some degree of change. When asked why their household dynamics did not change, Robert replied: "I would say the pandemic was nothing more than us just being in the house together more, a lot more time spent. But in terms of responsibilities, since we're kind of more traditional in those aspects, there was really not much change to how we take care of our household". Although we cannot know how his wife would have replied, more time at home did not change Robert's strongly held (and self-interested) expectations, which relieved him of domestic responsibilities even though they were both now working at home. The resistance to re-examining these beliefs not only prevented behavioral change, but also stifled the emergence of a *desire* to change. His conviction that he was not responsible for the household's domestic tasks overrode the obvious changes in the organization of his family's daily life.

Robert's and Noah's experiences contrast with those couples who were dissatisfied and thus viewed changes in their work and childcare arrangements as an opportunity to make changes to their division of household tasks. Christine, for instance, described how her husband, Pete, took on additional tasks once he began working remotely and she expressed dissatisfaction with their division of labor. For Robert, a similar shift to remote work did not prompt a change to his household participation because his traditional views rendered such structural changes irrelevant. As a group, the parents who did not desire change and therefore did not seek it exemplify the power of *inertia*. When traditional beliefs about women's responsibility for domestic labor were deeply entrenched, past domestic patterns shaped future arrangements. As Diego, a forty-six-year-old man with two young children, declared: "It's worked for me. I've dealt with [this situation] for a good part of ten years now".

It would be misleading, however, to presume that only men held tightly to such traditional views. Although close to 30 percent of fathers saw no reason to change their household's clear gender division, a similar percentage of mothers agreed. Talulah, a 29-year-old woman with a one-year-old baby, stated: "We just kind of have kept on that trajectory". And Anna, a 38-year-old woman with two teenage children, echoed the same sentiment: "That's kind of just always how we've done it". Similarly, Caroline, a 31-year-old woman with two young children, declared: "Yeah, we've never had an active conversation. It just fell into place". These comments reflect the degree to which an unequal division of domestic work remains the path of least of resistance for different-sex couples. Having chosen (whether consciously or unconsciously) to hold one person—in our sample, invariably a woman—responsible for most of the domestic work, it is difficult to veer from this path. For some, this happened without discussion.

5. Discussion

Scholars have debated whether institutional conditions or cultural attitudes are primarily responsible for the persistence of gender inequality in unpaid domestic labor. The significant changes to work arrangements and the routines of daily life that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to examine this question. Drawing on Risman's (2018) framework and interviews with 81 employed parents in heterosexual partnerships, we find that pandemic-driven disruptions in work and childcare routines were not sufficient to prompt movement toward more equality. Yet when these parents held egalitarian aspirations prior to the outset of the pandemic and could count on a partner who supported this view, they were able to take advantage of changes in workplace and childcare arrangements to create a more egalitarian division, at least in the short run.

Participants who reported no desire for change and then proceeded to maintain their established patterns included those who described a generally equal division of caregiving and breadwinning prior to the pandemic as well as those who described a more traditional one. Parents in both groups pointed to a general acceptance of their pre-pandemic arrangements to explain a process of inertia. Although a notable minority of this group reported maintaining an egalitarian routine (which pandemic-related shifts such as remote work supported), the majority reaffirmed a pre-existing traditional one. Despite any pandemic-induced contextual changes in their work locations and childcare demands, these parents faced few incentives to re-examine or change daily domestic patterns they deemed satisfactory.

Among the group who expressed a desire for change but were unable to achieve it, when deeply entrenched beliefs that women should be responsible for domestic labor were held by at least one partner—most often men— the ability of the other partner to achieve desired change remained limited. Confronted with their partner's entrenched gendered expectations, women in these relationships noted that their partners lacked the "initiative" to take on additional tasks and expressed frustration that their continuing responsibility for mental labor (such as delegating tasks) remained invisible even when their partners were spending more time at home. Despite pandemic-related shifts in the organization of paid work and childcare, these parents were unable to veer away from arrangements that took root long before the pandemic began. These thwarted desires underscore the ways entrenched beliefs and expectations, whether shared by both members of a partnership or only one, contribute to the stickiness of gender inequality. Movement toward more egalitarian sharing thus depended on the alignment between partners' agreement that equality is a personal as well as a social good and social contexts that could facilitate an enactment of this shared outlook.

It is important, nevertheless, to recognize the couples who valued equal sharing at the outset of the pandemic and were able to take advantage of their new conditions to achieve it. Changes in their work locations and pressures allowed those who already held egalitarian outlooks to move toward more egalitarian practices. Using the language provided by a "gender structure" framework, macro-level changes in social institutions did not by themselves push couples toward more egalitarian domestic arrangements, but they did allow couples who wished to do so to put those beliefs into practice. Institutional change alone cannot guarantee interactional change, but it facilitates change for those who desire it. Although most couples did not report large changes in their domestic lives, a minority did shift toward more equality in response to the institutional rearrangements wrought by the pandemic. While we differentiate institutional and cultural factors in our analysis, these factors interact. Over the long run, cultural beliefs can prompt shifts in institutions, which in turn may gradually exert their influence on cultural norms.

In addition to demonstrating the important role institutional change can play for those who hope to enact a more egalitarian partnership, it is also worth noting that over a third of our interviewees either reported an egalitarian division at the outset or reported achieving a more equitable one as the pandemic proceeded. Among this group, less than a quarter were women. While a minority, this group is not inconsequential. Its existence points to

the ways that the gender revolution that began in the later decades of the 20th century may have stalled, but it has not reversed. The post-pandemic rebound in women's labor force participation to pre-pandemic levels testifies to the continuing power of this still developing and undeniably consequential social shift.

The diverse pathways traversed by our interviewees reveal a set of factors that prompted some couples to move toward more equality even as most did not. Since professionals and salaried workers were more likely to work remotely for prolonged periods, they are also more likely to exemplify the ways that more flexible work arrangements influence domestic practices. Service, manual, and manufacturing workers were far less likely to possess options, such as working from home or controlling their work schedules, that facilitated change for those who wished it, but they still experienced changes to their working lives. However, the changes they reported—including lay-offs, changes to on-site work hours, and changes in employee benefits—were more likely to be unwelcome.

In any case, almost everyone reported a reduction in responsibilities outside the home, whether that included less time at work or in social activities. The rise of remote work was thus only one aspect of the changes to daily life that occurred during the pandemic. Given the cessation of leisure activities outside one's household, time at home with family members increased for almost everyone. It would thus be reasonable to expect that spending more time together would encourage couples to seek more equal sharing. Yet this did not occur for most interviewees, regardless of their occupation or socioeconomic status. And while some participants attributed their views on gender to their local cultural milieu, including living or being raised in a particular region of the country, we did not find regional differences.

6. Conclusions

We have shown that conceptualizing gender as a social structure that incorporates both institutional and cultural factors helps explain how gender inequality is perpetuated and potentially changed. If the societal goal is to decrease gender inequality, it is critical to understand the conditions under which it is likely to change or be reproduced. We found that major shifts in the organization of work and caregiving institutions—in this case including the rise of remote work and the move of schooling and caregiving into the home—did not by themselves reduce inequality in domestic labor for most parents. Only among those heterosexual couples where our interviewee reported that both members of the partnership held egalitarian aspirations before the pandemic did institutional changes lead to more egalitarian relationships. Put differently, institutional change matters because it allows those who desire more egalitarian partnerships to create them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered a unique opportunity to examine the impact of large-scale changes to the organization of everyday life, in this case consisting of stay-at-home mandates and the reconfigurations in childcare, jobs, and social lives. While some scholars have found gender inequality in domestic labor increased during the pandemic due to increased demands on parents, our inquiry has sought to understand the implications of institutional shifts for families by examining what conditions enabled more egalitarian arrangements for some couples (if not for most). Insights from this analysis provide greater clarity about the combination of factors that allow for the emergence of more equitable arrangements in intimate relationships. Further research needs to investigate the shape of these patterns for diverse populations and especially for diverse racial, ethnic, class, and non-heteronormative groups.

In addition to underscoring much that others have reported about the persistence of gender inequality during the pandemic (Calarco et al. 2020, 2021; Dunatchik et al. 2021; Yavorsky et al. 2021), our analysis contributes to the robust literature that seeks to explain why gender inequality in the cognitive and behavioral aspects of unpaid labor (Daminger 2020; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010) persists even as women continue to build strong ties to paid work. Like others, we find that only a minority report shifts toward a more egalitarian division (Carlson et al. 2020). Yet we also offer an analysis of how movement

toward more domestic equality can take place under the right conditions. Our findings suggest that reducing gender inequality within families depends on transforming the organization of work and caregiving, but parents' shared commitment to egalitarian views is equally important. Social change toward gender equality thus depends on the convergence of institutional forms and ideological commitments that reinforce egalitarian principles.

Our findings provide some direction about where to focus both research and policy efforts designed to facilitate more egalitarian arrangements. Despite the prevalence of unequal divisions of labor, we found notable diversity among today's heterosexual parents, with approximately a third upholding egalitarian views. This diversity points to the need for change on two fronts. In addition to pinpointing the institutional changes that will allow couples with egalitarian views to enact their preferences, we also need to better understand how cultural beliefs about the sources of gender inequality are constructed and maintained. In the absence of ideological support for equality, the effectiveness of institutional changes will be limited. Many of our participants, including many who found their domestic arrangement dissatisfying, reported feeling stuck in a pattern they had never questioned, or if they did, felt unable to change. In contrast, among the minority whose egalitarian preferences had been thwarted by institutional obstacles, pandemic-induced changes, especially in their work circumstances, allowed them to move closer to their preferred practices. The experiences of those who created more egalitarian partnerships point to the combination of institutional and cultural shifts that could enlarge the options for everyone. In a post-pandemic world, expanding the option to create an egalitarian partnership will depend on increasing institutional flexibility and encouraging cultural shifts that the pandemic brought to the fore.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Gender		N	%
	Men	32	40%
	Women	49	60%
Race			
	White	55	68%
	Black	8	10%
	Latinx	11	14%
	Asian	1	1%
	Other	5	6%
	No answer	1	1%

Education			
	Less than HS	0	0%
	HS degree	6	7%
	Some College	25	31%
	College Grad	24	30%
	Graduate Degree	25	31%
	No answer	1	1%
Pop. Density			
	Urban	12	15%
	Suburban	31	38%
	Town	5	6%
	Small City	21	26%
	Rural	12	15%
Income			
	Under $20,000	1	1%
	$20–50,000	10	12%
	$50–75,000	17	21%
	$75–100,000	13	16%
	$100–150,000	21	26%
	More than $150,000	19	23%
	No answer	1	1%

Note

[1] We include part-time as well as full-time workers in our analysis for several reasons. First, the degree of work participation changed for many interviewees throughout the pandemic, including many who experienced moments when they worked part time and moments when they worked full time. Second, since we focus on participants' desire for change, such desires occurred among people who were committed to varying amounts of working time. Accordingly, we did not limit our analysis to only those who were employed full time. Instead, it is important to understand whether and why workers with varying degrees of labor force attachment desire a more egalitarian division of labor. By including participants with the full range of employment arrangements, we more accurately capture the sheer variability among couples in their desire and ability to accomplish change during the pandemic.

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Housework Reallocation between Genders and Generations during China's COVID-19 Lockdowns: Patterns & Reasons

Ting Wang

Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC 27412, USA; t_wang5@uncg.edu

Abstract: This paper examines housework reallocation during China's stringent pandemic lockdowns in 2020, where individuals were homebound and job-free while employment status remained unchanged. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, it analyzes 1669 surveys and 100 interviews to understand changes in domestic labor patterns and the underlying reasons. The findings indicate that men increased their participation in grocery shopping but decreased in cooking, cleaning, and laundry during the lockdown. This gender-task pattern was mirrored in multi-generational households, where younger family members often took on these tasks. The reasons articulated for these shifts predominantly converged around the 'doing gender' theory. Women, particularly those working full-time, had more time to engage in household chores. Men, while also having more available time, predominantly focused on grocery shopping, a task that gained masculine connotations during the lockdown. Factors such as perceived differences in household labor quality, difficulty delegating housework, and reduced workload led to women's increased involvement and specialization in domestic tasks. The study challenges the notion that economic factors are the primary drivers of gender-based division of housework. Instead, it suggests that ingrained gender norms continue to dictate domestic roles, as evidenced during the lockdown period devoid of usual economic and time pressures.

Keywords: housework division; COVID-19 pandemic; lockdowns; China; time availability; gender; generation

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1. Introduction

Research on housework division excluding childcare (Sullivan 2013) has surged since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The pandemic and following unprecedented lockdowns have been viewed as an exceptional setting as genders needed to adjust to the new circumstances that were different in multiple dimensions of the work–family interface. Studies from several developed countries found mixed results on whether the pandemic caused a fairer division of housework between genders. In Italy, women took on more housework than men (Del Boca et al. 2020), while in Canada and Spain, the quarantine led to a more equal distribution as individuals had more available time to respond to domestic demands (Farré et al. 2020; Shafer et al. 2020). The situation in the US and UK presented a complex picture; some studies suggested a more balanced redistribution of housework, while others indicated a less equitable division, often exacerbated by childcare responsibilities (Carlson et al. 2021; Chung et al. 2020; Dunatchik et al. 2021; Sánchez et al. 2021; Sevilla and Smith 2020). Some studies from developing countries showed that lockdowns reinforced traditional gender roles in domestic responsibilities, with genders specializing in different types of housework (e.g., Obioma et al. 2022). However, little is known about how families adapted in China, where the most stringent lockdown measures were ever imposed. A notable exception is the recent study by Xu et al. (2022), which examined the transition of housework duties between generations within various household arrangements.

In response to the emergence of COVID-19, China implemented strict measures. Wuhan was on lockdown since 23 January 2020, followed by most cities and towns through (at least) February in the form of Spring Festival holiday extensions. All provincial units (including autonomous regions and direct-administered municipalities) in mainland China responded with Tier-1 measures, the highest level prescribed by the government, including suspending work, business, school, and gatherings (see Appendix A Table A1).

Unlike most countries' lockdowns that only suspended public activities, China's Tier-1 lockdowns in early 2020 featured a "closed-off management" system that directly impacted both public and private spheres (Liu et al. 2021). In this setup, each residential unit—whether a residential compound or a village—maintained just a single open gateway. Community workers monitored every resident's temperature, face coverings, and entry/exit passes, effectively regulating movement around the clock. Residents were given quota-controlled permission to leave the unit (for example, one person per household every one or two days), with some regions even imposing a complete ban on leaving. Instead, residents could pick up deliveries from designated areas within the communal unit. In the most restricted areas, assigned community workers delivered goods to residents in need.

In addition to physical confinement, the suspension of productive activities was another aspect of China's lockdowns. Unlike in other countries where teleworking was an option, the timing of China's lockdowns coincided with the traditional Spring Festival holiday, a period when most production activities are already halted. These lockdowns ranged in duration from 27 to 99 days, with the average being 43 days (see Appendix A Table A1) for more details.

Consequently, China's lockdowns had a fairly uniform impact on domestic lives, effectively isolating a vast majority from their usual market work. Estimates suggest that at the end of January, which coincided with the Chinese New Year, approximately 90% of the workforce was not engaged in active employment. Even in the subsequent months of February and March, only about 36% and 28% of people, respectively, returned to work (Public Books 2020). This scenario created an unusual setting in which a large majority of the population found themselves confined to their homes without employment for an extended duration. During this period, individuals either continued to receive income from their employers or relied on savings accumulated from previous employment, thereby sustaining the existing economic balance between genders.

Previous discussions on housework division, including those during the pandemic, have largely been grounded in an economic framework, which posits that domestic activities are essentially a byproduct of productive relationships. Market work assumingly determines the time and economic resources that genders have available for negotiating household responsibilities and affects venues for gender display. However, the unique circumstances of China's stringent lockdowns, framed as an emergency state response, offer a different context for this study.

During these lockdowns, the economic variables that typically influence household dynamics were temporarily held constant owing to the suspension of most productive activities during a national holiday. Consequently, this setting—where individuals were confined to their homes and largely disengaged from employment—presented an unparalleled opportunity to examine gender interactions within households. By considering the pandemic lockdowns as an external shock that froze productive activities while preserving economic status, the division of domestic labor among confined, job-free individuals can be scrutinized in a novel light.

In this article, I explore the effects of China's 2020 pandemic lockdowns on the gender-based division of household labor. Utilizing the unique conditions created by these strict lockdown measures, I examine shifts in the allocation of housework responsibilities across genders and generations and delve into the underlying reasons for any observed changes. The paper is organized as follows: I begin with a succinct overview of the theoretical framework surrounding the gender division of housework, along with an examination of how this division has evolved during the global pandemic. Subsequently, I outline the

distinct cultural context that characterizes domestic labor divisions in China and describe the adjustments made to the survey methodology to suit this context. This is followed by a presentation of the sample distribution and the data analysis techniques employed. The final sections offer a discussion of the results, culminating in a summary of the key findings, their broader implications, and the study's limitations.

2. Gender Division of Housework

The division of housework between genders can be explained through three determinants: money, time, and gender. Prevailing views suggest that either money or time plays a role in perpetuating inequality from the productive to the reproductive sector. These views contend that women perform more housework because they earn less in the labor market and have less bargaining power (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010; Lyonette and Crompton 2015) or have more idle time available (Bianchi et al. 2000; Gough and Killewald 2011; van der Lippe et al. 2018). On the other hand, the gender-based approach highlights that gender roles and expectations have a structural impact on behavior. The act of performing and not performing housework is, in and of itself, a manifestation of 'doing gender' (Bittman et al. 2003; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Recent decades have seen an increasing emphasis on the gender-based approach, as women continue to shoulder the majority of housework despite their increased economic resources and reduced time availability resulting from women's growing participation in market work (Bünning 2020; Hook 2017; Meil et al. 2023; Presser 1994; van der Lippe et al. 2018). Indeed, housework has historically been constructed as women's work, and performing or avoiding it can be a means of displaying gender (Brines 1994) or neutralizing deviance from gender expectations (Bittman et al. 2003; Greenstein 2000; Sullivan 2011) accordingly.

Although the distribution of economic and time resources may change, the gender structure remains primarily stable, even though ideological changes may occur over time (Risman 2011; Sullivan et al. 2018). Gender relations permeate society's individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions, which should be considered when examining the relationship between gender and non-gender-based factors, such as economic resources and time (Risman 2004). Therefore, even though time and money appear gender-neutral, their values may still be gendered due to their different denotations between women and men.

The proliferation of research has further intensified the debate surrounding the root causes of the gendered division of household labor, with many empirical tests inadvertently subject to spuriousness due to the intricate nature of the subject (see Bianchi and Milkie 2010 for a review). For example, endogeneity biases are a concern in empirical tests when differentiating between the effects of time and money or gender and time/money because time availability is highly correlated with income (Jenkins and O'Leary 1995), and individuals may forgo higher-paying, time-consuming jobs to prioritize family commitments (Hook 2017). For this reason, the COVID-19 lockdowns have been perceived as a unique opportunity to observe how an external shock has impacted housework divisions and to test which determinants are more influential in this context.

3. Housework Reallocation during the Pandemic

Research on the division of household chores during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that the crisis has significantly impacted household dynamics and the distribution of household work. Studies have primarily focused on two sources of change: the increased available time (e.g., Hipp and Bünning 2021; Meraviglia and Dudka 2021) and domestic insourcing (e.g., Collins et al. 2021; Hank and Steinbach 2021) during the period.

The effects of changes in time arrangements as the primary driver of the new housework divisions have yielded mixed results regarding gender (in)equalization. For example, a comparison of two representative samples of Italian working women before and after the onset of the pandemic found that over two-thirds of women and 40% of men spent more

time doing housework. Women's workload increased independently of their partner's working arrangements, whereas men contributed more only when their partners continued to work (Del Boca et al. 2020). Farré et al. (2020) found that although men increased their participation in housework in a Spanish sample, the extent was slight compared to the burden that fell on women. In contrast, studies from North America and Australia suggest a more gender-egalitarian division of household chores during the initial months of lockdowns, with men contributing more while having more time at home (Carlson et al. 2021; Craig and Churchill 2021; Shafer et al. 2020). However, this equilibrium is disrupted when childcare is factored in. The introduction of childcare responsibilities tends to tilt the balance of domestic labor toward women, further intensifying their workload (Dunatchik et al. 2021).

The impact of domestic insourcing on the gendered division of housework has been more consistent as women have been found to take on more of the extra domestic work while the service sector was closed. Previous studies suggest domestic outsourcing has been a major factor in gender convergence in household activities since this century, significantly reducing women's housework time (Sullivan et al. 2018). However, with the pandemic leading to unprecedented de-institutionalization, families experienced increased domestic responsibilities when restaurants and laundry services closed, and household servants were discontinued for personal precautions and/or policy prohibitions. This might increase women's household responsibilities, particularly for those who previously benefited from domestic outsourcing (Hank and Steinbach 2021). As a result, women took on three times more of the increased housework than men in 2020 (United Nations 2020).

While research from around the world has effectively informed our understanding of the pandemic's gendered impacts, most samples contain changes in paid work arrangements that complicates establishing a direct causal link to changes in the gender division of housework. The pandemic's impacts on employment, particularly affecting women's likelihood of job loss or transition to telecommuting, raises questions about how these changes in employment status relate to housework responsibilities (Adams-Prassl et al. 2020; Alon et al. 2020; Azcona et al. 2020; Hupkau and Petrongolo 2020; Kashen et al. 2020). Some studies suggest that women spontaneously (albeit unwillingly) reduced their paid work hours or quit jobs to respond to the increased domestic demands during the pandemic (e.g., Andrew et al. 2022; Craig and Churchill 2021; Mooi-Reci and Risman 2021), while others argue that women's disproportionate increase in domestic contributions was a result of their higher job volatility that caused them to spend more time at home than men during the crisis (e.g., Biroli et al. 2021; Farré et al. 2020; Hayes and Lee 2023; Reichelt et al. 2021; Sevilla and Smith 2020). On the flip side, men experiencing job loss often grapple with heightened emotional stress linked to societal expectations of masculinity and breadwinning, potentially leading to a return to traditional household labor roles (Andrew et al. 2022). Gender dynamics are also evident in remote work scenarios, with male-dominated occupations being more conducive to remote arrangements, offering men greater flexibility. In contrast, women in the service industry, which is less adaptable to remote work, face challenges (United Nations 2020), potentially reducing the gender gap in domestic labor as remote work permits more time at home (Farré et al. 2020).

The pandemic's economic shifts thus significantly influence the gender division of household chores. This aligns with previous research, suggesting that the disparate impact of employment changes on gender largely dictates domestic labor division (Berghammer 2022; Craig and Churchill 2021; Del Boca et al. 2020; Hayes and Lee 2023; Reichelt et al. 2021). However, can economic factors be controlled in order to study the nuances of domestic labor divisions? China's strict lockdowns spatiotemporally confined people for a relatively long time while many productive activities were temporarily suspended. Despite this, most people's economic status and resources remained relatively stable. This situation rendered genders ostensibly equally available for household chores, independent of employment status. Furthermore, the closure of most public amenities and transportation systems

during this period may have redefined the physical landscape in which gender roles were expressed through different housework practices.

If economic resources were the dominant factor affecting the division of household labor, we would expect to see minimal changes between genders in this context. In other words, any observed *changes* in the distribution of domestic responsibilities can be more clearly attributed to available time variations (see Figure 1). Gender, furthermore, may serve as a critical determinant in how these task redistributions manifest differently among men and women across different types of chores.

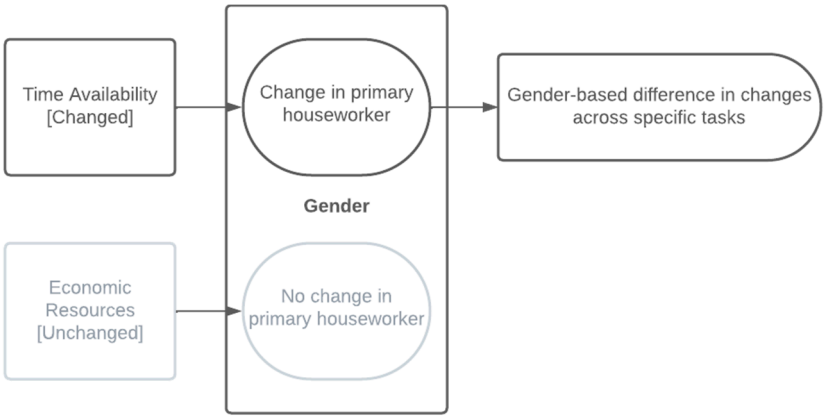

Figure 1. The analysis logic model.

Therefore, comparing household labor divisions before and during China's stringent lockdowns offers a unique opportunity for a more isolated examination of the effects of changes in available time and de-institutionalization without the confounding variables of employment status changes.

4. Housework Division in the Chinese Context

Theories on housework division have primarily been developed and tested in advanced Western contexts, where the nuclear family structure is a norm. However, applying these models to places where intergenerational co-residence is common can be problematic. In China, for instance, over 67% of parents aged 65 and older lived with their adult children in 2005 (Zeng and Xie 2014). If including proximate residence, the figure rises to over 80% of conjugal households in a nationally representative sample in 2010 (Gruijters and Ermisch 2019). Co-residence may have been even more common during the lockdown, given the family reunion tradition during the Spring Festival.

The involvement of older generations, residing either together or nearby, substantially alters the domestic labor dynamics for younger ones, contingent upon the elders' life course stage, such as offering assistance during health or needing support during sickness or old age (Cheng 2018; Gruijters and Ermisch 2019). By excluding extended family members and focusing only on the spouses' division, existing methods may omit crucial or primary houseworkers and result in biased findings. However, involving more family members in the study can exponentially increase the complexity of the housework division, making the research more challenging. Therefore, exploring housework division effectively and efficiently in the Chinese context may require adapting the existing methods to account for these features.

4.1. Intergenerational Living and Housework

While a growing body of the literature has examined the impact of intergenerational living arrangements on housework division, most studies still focus solely on the within-couple division of domestic labor, treating the presence of extended families as either a control or explanatory variable (e.g., Craig and Powell 2017; Spitze and Ward 1995). Hu and Mu (2021) investigated the effect of intergenerational living on the spousal housework

division in China. However, due to data limitations, they did not explicitly examine the gender of the actual houseworker if it was someone other than the married couple. Although they acknowledged the gender significance of senior family members, it was inferred from changes in the couples' housework hours. The lack of examination of the extended family's labor division hinders our understanding of intergenerational gender roles in household work.

4.2. Generational and Gender Differences

In the context of the expanded household structure, the division of housework can be complicated by generational and gender differences related to crucial factors, such as gender role attitudes and workforce participation. This is especially true in China, a country that has experienced significant economic and social changes in recent decades. On the one hand, Confucianism has ingrained a hierarchical social order that respects male superiority culturally (e.g., patrilineality) and structurally (e.g., patrilocality) (Johnson 1983). As a result, Chinese and other East Asian women carry a higher percentage of housework compared to their Western counterparts (Kan and Hertog 2017; Kim 2013; Qian and Sayer 2016).

On the other hand, gender parity has been promoted in China since the establishment of the communist state in 1949, with an emphasis on equalizing property rights (e.g., ownership, heirship) and marriage practices (e.g., monogamy, rights to divorce) to mobilize women into the workforce. Women's paid employment has been considered a socialist achievement, with paid employment being the norm in China for both sexes across classes and generations. Despite this, the revolution did not address the cultural and structural aspects of the patriarchal system (Gruijters and Ermisch 2019). As a result, since the early 1990s, China's adoption of neoliberalism has widened gender gaps in labor force participation and pay, with women disproportionately affected by the withdrawal (e.g., employment-based creches) or privatization (e.g., from the state- to employer-funded maternity leave) of socialist welfare provisions. The participation of women in China's labor force has seen a notable decline since 1990, a trend that runs counter to advancements in gender equality observed in many other countries over the same period. According to data from the International Labour Organization (2021), the gap in labor force participation rates between men and women in China has widened from 9.4 percentage points in 1990 to 14.2 percentage points in 2019. Likewise, the gender pay gap has also deteriorated: in 1988, women earned 86.3% of what men earned, but this ratio dropped to 76.2% by 2004 (He and Wu 2018).

Given such a historical context, intergenerational co-residency inevitably comprises cohorts with distinct gender role attitudes, working experiences, and bargaining resources in the domestic labor division. Older individuals typically harbor conservative gender ideologies, yet de-gendering is also noticed among seniors. Silver (2003) suggested that as individuals progress into their third (60–84 years) and fourth stages (85+ years) of life, traditional gender expectations in everyday life often soften. This weakening is associated with integrating feminine and masculine traits due to biopsychological and socioeconomic shifts (e.g., retirement, dependency). This transition is more pronounced in retired men, who face greater losses in power, income, status, public recognition, and family authority than their female counterparts. Supporting this, research shows that men tend to increase their household responsibilities more than women as they age (Verbrugge et al. 1996). Goh's (2011) ethnographic study found a similar shift in urban Chinese families, with grandparents yielding to parents in child discipline and taking on more chores to alleviate pressure on dual-income couples, challenging the traditional Confucianist hierarchy and highlighting seniors' reduced power.

5. Methods and Data Collection

5.1. Research Design

This study employs the qualitative method proposed by Lyonette and Crompton (2015) to examine the primary responsibility for routine housework types, including grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, and laundry (Coltrane 2000; Crompton and Lyonette 2011), before and during the initial COVID-19 lockdown.[1]

While retrospective inquiry into primary housework responsibilities may not offer the granularity of time-based measurements, it provides a higher degree of accuracy by minimizing recall errors, especially considering that the periods under investigation were several months removed from the time of data collection (Hook 2017; Lyonette and Crompton 2015).

This method also affords greater consistency in the comparisons by adjusting for situational changes, like a lockdown, that could temporarily alter the volume of chores yet not significantly shift the primary responsibility. For example, in households where women traditionally performed the majority of chores and had lower earnings, this pattern would likely persist during the lockdown. This would hold true even if men took on additional tasks in response to heightened domestic needs, given that the economic status quo remained a significant factor in housework division. Utilizing this qualitative approach allows us to exclude inconsequential shifts and focus only on substantial changes in the primary housework roles, thus highlighting cases that merit deeper theoretical exploration.

Respondents were asked about their family's experience with long-time quarantine during the 2020 Spring Festival. To identify qualified participants for this study—those whose households were under quarantine without any intervening work-related activities and who reported stable economic status—follow-up questions concerning the housework division were posed only to those who indicated that "All family members experienced extended quarantine without work" and that there were "No changes in employment status during the lockdown".

A mixed-method approach, combining a survey and interviews, was adopted to ensure the inclusivity of diverse household arrangements. The survey used a broad conceptualization of family, categorizing members by gender. The central questions of the survey (see Appendix A Table A2) aimed to explore the gender-based division of general housework and specific tasks to identify shifts during the lockdown period. However, it is important to note that this qualitative approach may not fully capture instances where changes in responsibilities were equally distributed between genders (e.g., mutual increases or decreases in tasks). To mitigate reporting bias stemming from social desirability, the survey options designated either female or male family members as the primary contributors to household labor. All other arrangements, including those involving an equal division of tasks, were categorized under "Others" and were subject to text-based follow-up for further clarification (Geist and Cohen 2011; Kan 2008).

Follow-up interviews probed further to capture the patterns of change and perceived reasons for such changes. The interview guidelines included three open-ended questions regarding primary houseworkers and reasons for changes:

- Q1: Who was the primary houseworker of (four types) at the usual time/before the lockdown?
- Q2: Who was the primary houseworker of (four types) during the lockdown?
- Q3: (For differences between Q1 and Q2 responses). Why did your family make such a change?

This approach potentially broadened applicable cases from heterosexual couples to more diverse circumstances as long as different sexes lived together.

The generational relationship between the named houseworker and the respondent was coded. Divisions in both households were queried if the respondent's household structure changed during the lockdown (e.g., reunion with parents). For respondents who lived alone or without an opposite-sex member during either examined period (before

or during the lockdown), housework divisions in the bigger family (e.g., parents' home) were compared to maximize case inclusion. This approach, however, led to the technical exclusion of households comprising same-sex couples from the analysis. Consequently, in some cases, the respondent was not a houseworker; still, they provided a lens through which to observe the division in their family.

5.2. Survey Distribution

Fieldwork commenced in May 2020 after all lockdowns were lifted in mainland China. Utilizing a Qualtrics questionnaire and online interviews, I gathered data from adult residents, primarily disseminated through paid services on WeChat and Weibo, with the aim of collecting 2000 survey responses and 100 qualified interviews from Chinese citizens 18 and older. Voluntary response sampling, a technique frequently employed in online surveys, served as the chosen sampling methodology.

Upon survey completion, participants could opt for an interview by adding me via a provided QR code linked to my WeChat account. Once added as a contact, I introduced myself as a researcher and inquired about their willingness and availability to partake in an interview. Participants were offered the choice of verbal or written communication methods facilitated by the WeChat platform. Of the 100 participants who partook in interviews, 78 elected to provide written responses. Intriguingly, those who opted for verbal communication generally were older.

The selection of the response format may be subject to social desirability bias, a psychological tendency wherein respondents manage impressions or adjust their self-representations to conform with socially accepted norms or attitudes (Bergen and Labonté 2019). Written responses, compared to verbal ones, could potentially introduce further bias, given that they permit more time for reflection and editing (Jackson and Messick 1958). Nonetheless, the study's design serves as a countermeasure against such biases. Specifically, the study employs a comparative analysis of the allocation of household labor before and during periods of pandemic-induced lockdowns. This methodology effectively mitigated bias, evidenced by the consistency in the respondents' reporting of household chore distribution across the time frames examined (Paulhus 2002). This consistency enables the study to accurately capture any transitions in household labor dynamics, which is the primary focus of this research.

It is worth noting that while 26 respondents added my account, they did not respond to subsequent interview inquiries. Additionally, five interviews were prematurely terminated and were therefore not included in the final count toward the study's targeted goals. Each interviewee received a CNY 30 incentive upon completion, encouraging them to circulate the survey within their networks.

Of the 2030 questionnaire responses collected by November 2020, 105 were removed due to the lack of housework-related input, and 256 were disqualified due to missing information. A total of 100 interviews were conducted by August 2020 involving respondents who had experienced extended quarantine without the presence of working family members. However, four interview cases were later removed from the analysis: these were instances where respondents lived without any family members of the opposite sex. Additionally, one case was excluded where the respondent resided solely with a young child before and during the lockdown period. The exact response rate for the questionnaire is undetermined due to the digital nature and wide range of solicitation networks. The interview response rate was 15.8% when including non-responsive participants or 12.7% when not, which aligns with typical online interview response rates.

6. Sample Distribution and Data Analysis Methods

6.1. Sample Distribution

The interviewees technically form a subset of the survey participants per the recruitment design. A comparison of their distributions helps illustrate their representativeness. Out of 1669 survey responses, 57% (n = 950) were from females, over 70% were from urban

dwellers, 62% had children, and nearly 61% held a bachelor's degree or higher. Among the 100 interviewees, 78 were women, 90 lived in urban areas, 62 had children, and 61 possessed at least a bachelor's degree. In contrast, China's national urbanization rate in 2020 stood at 63.9%, with 37.2% of households having school-age children and around 15.6% of the population having a college degree (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2021). Additionally, the survey found a notable prevalence of intergenerational co-residence, with 60% of respondents living in multi-generational households before and 72% during the lockdown. This trend was similarly observed among the interviewees, with 52 living in such households before and 76 during the lockdown.

As Table 1 illustrates, the characteristics of respondents can significantly influence their reported reallocation of housework during the lockdown. For instance, an increase in household size was often associated with men contributing more to shopping, whereas women took on a greater overall load and cleaning tasks.

Table 1. Gender-based reallocation of household labor during lockdowns: overall changes and detailed multivariate regression analysis (coded as 1 = from women to men or more equitable, 0 = unchanged, −1 = from men to women or less equitable).

Respondent's Characteristics	Overall Load	Shopping	Cooking	Laundry	Cleaning
Change in household arrangement (1: upscaled, 0: no change, −1: downscaled)	−0.06 **	0.05 **	4.00×10^{-3}	−0.01	−0.06 ***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Presence of children	0.01	0.03	−0.04 **	0.05 **	−0.16 ***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Education	0.09 ***	0.02 *	7.69×10^{-4}	0.06 ***	0.03 **
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Age	−0.03 *	−0.01	-4.29×10^{-3}	0.02	0.01
	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Residence (1 = urban, 0 = non-urban)	2.14×10^{-4}	-1.16×10^{-3}	-4.13×10^{-3}	−0.31 ***	0.17 ***
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Intercept	−0.28	0.21	−0.02	−0.32	−0.21
Adjust R-squared	0.03	0.01	0.004	0.11	0.07
Obs	1660	1561	1506	1526	1521

Note: The table presents estimated coefficients and robust standard errors (in parentheses). These estimates are derived from robust regression models that account for heteroskedasticity. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

The presence of young and school-age children often reinforces traditional gender roles. Women with such children are typically more involved in housework in addition to childcare than those without (Dunatchik et al. 2021; Hochschild and Machung 2012). As Table 1 demonstrates, the necessity for extra childcare or tutoring during the lockdown significantly impacts domestic labor distribution, with women showing increased involvement in cooking and cleaning. Lastly, higher education levels correlate with more egalitarian gender role attitudes (Steiber et al. 2016), linked to a more equitable distribution of household labor during lockdown periods (e.g., Berghammer 2022). This trend is corroborated in the current sample as well. As Table 1 indicates, education significantly predicts a more equal household labor distribution during lockdown across all task types except cooking, when controlling for other variables.

While the samples generally represent the population in terms of urban residence, there is an overrepresentation of females,[2] families with children, and highly educated individuals. This skewness might arise from the survey's content appealing more to females and parents and the internet-based method favoring technologically adept respondents, often seen in online and domestic activity surveys. Therefore, when interpreting the findings, it is crucial to remain cognizant of these potential biases, which could render

the samples leaning toward being more egalitarian than might be observed in the broader population.

A comprehensive comparison and contrast between the survey and interview samples, demonstrating the representative nature of the interviewees' sociodemographic distribution in relation to the larger survey sample, can be found in Appendix B.

6.2. Data Analysis Methods

I analyzed quantitative and qualitative data to validate patterns of change and the underlying reasons. Descriptive and statistical analyses were used for the quantitative data to reveal reallocation patterns, followed by qualitative data to show the perceived reasons for such changes.

I utilized ATLAS.ti software (version 9) to organize the interview data, codes, themes, and memos, including a reflexive diary. I used the template approach (Crabtree and Miller 1999) and the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) for analysis. First, I coded the interviews using a priori codes derived from the interview guidelines to sort data into two themes (who and why) based on task types. Then, I conducted inductive analysis within each category to identify common experiences and themes as subcodes. Using the subcodes as new deductive codes, I conducted a new cycle of inductive analysis to identify new patterns and themes with genders compared.

Comparisons were made between female and male family members of the same generation if their housework responsibilities (volume and type) changed during the lockdown. The comparisons were then drawn across generations, both between and within genders. This approach allowed for detecting housework reallocation trends, both intersexually and intergenerationally. The process was iterated until no new codes emerged. The last step was to detect the connections between the themes and distinguish the reasons for each identified change pattern. I grouped the codes by gender and generation according to their connections to each pattern. I conducted the coding process twice, with the second round two weeks after the first round to enhance dependability.

A total of 67 codes were deduced, revealing seven mutually exclusive patterns of housework reallocation during the lockdown period. These emergent patterns include (1) a shift of housework responsibilities from male to female members, (2) a shift from female to male members, (3) men taking on new household tasks, (4) women taking on new household tasks, (5) the redistribution of housework from male to other male members, (6) the redistribution from female to other female members, and (7) no change in the primary individual responsible for housework. The findings have been corroborated through the use of a reflexive diary log (Thorpe 2004). In the subsequent section, we will discuss themes and patterns that emerged as highly grounded and dense codes[3] (Elliott 2018) to illustrate both the patterns and narrated reasons for the shifts in domestic responsibilities.

7. Result and Discussion

7.1. Theme 1: Who Did Housework?

During lockdowns, most questionnaire respondents reported no change in household chore division, while 44% reported some changes (see Figure 2 and Table 2(I)). In over 65% of instances where changes were reported, male family members performed more housework, whereas female involvement increased in 31% of households. The proportion of responses indicating no change fell when it came to specific housework tasks, with 42% of questionnaire respondents and 22% of interviewees reporting no alteration in the four tasks under discussion.

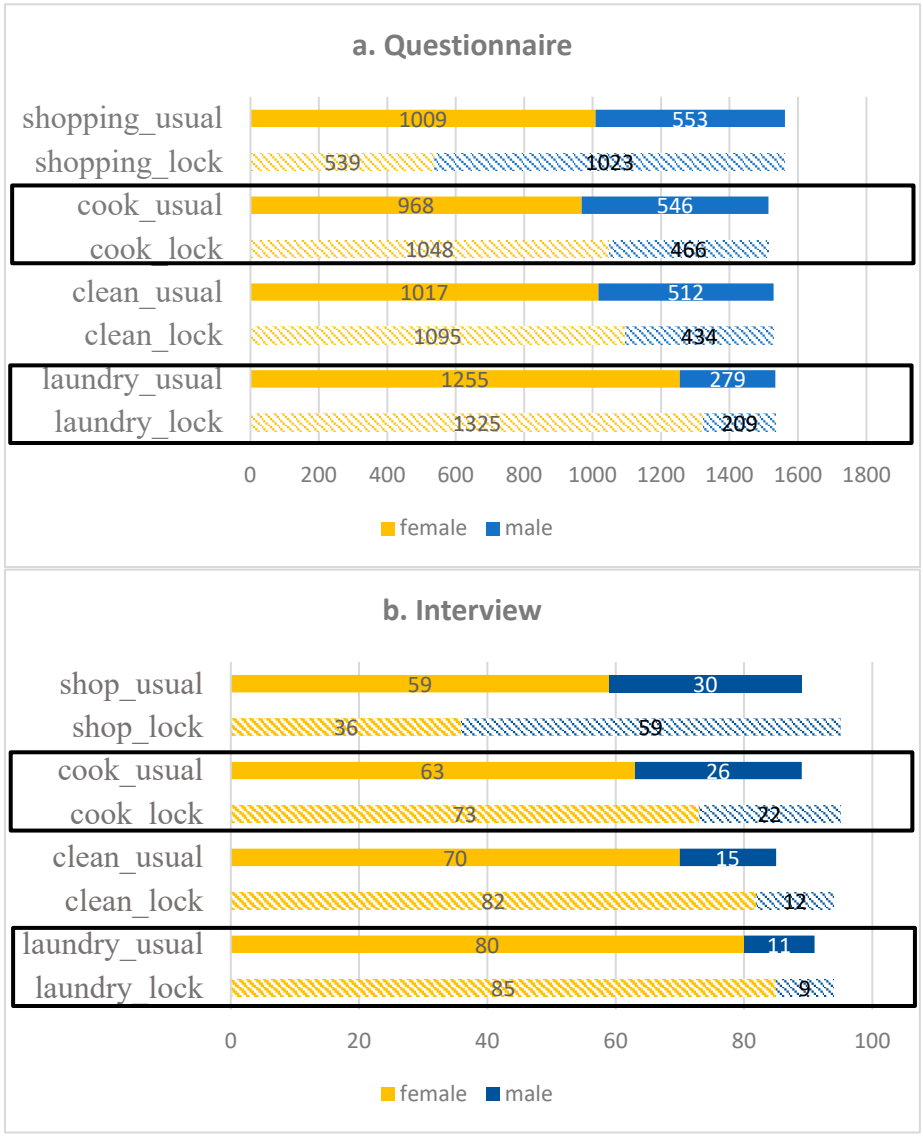

Figure 2. Changes in the primary houseworker by gender and task type.

The "Others" option—pertaining to cases where neither male nor female family members were the primary houseworkers—was chosen in 107 entries for shopping, 155 for cooking, 135 for laundry, and 140 for cleaning. For respondents who chose "Others" instead of a division between genders, a follow-up question was provided to clarify the specific situation. Among all text inputs, "paid house helpers did it" was the most commonly given detail when provided.

Interview cases that deviated from standard scenarios were meticulously coded. This coding accounted for instances where responsibilities were reported as equally distributed or collaboratively managed. These instances constitute a third category, supplementing the core categories that identify either males or females as the primary contributors to domestic tasks.

Consistency in change trends is evident when comparing the two samples: male family members reported taking on a greater portion of grocery shopping but less of other housework types. Such shifts are statistically significant, as the larger survey response sample corroborates.

Table 2. Changes in housework division between genders during lockdowns.

I. Reported Overall Changes. Percentage of Cases Is Reported.			
Housework Division Change	**Male Members Did More**	**Female Members Did More**	**No Change**
Female respondents/950	25%	13%	60%
Male respondents/719	34%	14%	51%
Total/1669	29%	14%	56%

II. Variations in task performance categorized by type, with case frequencies and percentages. The mean gender score of houseworkers (male = 0, female = 1) for each period is used to calculate differences.

	Shopping		**Mean of Sex**	**Cooking**		**Mean of Sex**	**Cleaning**		**Mean of Sex**	**Laundry**		**Mean of Sex**
Primary Houseworker	**Male**	**Female**		**Male**	**Female**		**Male**	**Female**		**Male**	**Female**	
a. Questionnaire: 1669 cases												
Before lockdown	553 (33%)	1009 (60%)	0.65	546 (33%)	968 (58%)	0.64	512 (31%)	1017 (61%)	0.67	279 (17%)	1255 (75%)	0.82
During lockdown	1023 (61%)	539 (32%)	0.35	466 (28%)	1048 (63%)	0.69	434 (26%)	1095 (66%)	0.72	209 (13%)	1325 (79%)	0.86
Difference [#]			0.30 ***			−0.05 ***			−0.05 ***			−0.04 ***
b. Interview: 95 cases												
Before lockdown	30 (32%)	59 (62%)	0.66	26 (27%)	63 (66%)	0.71	15 (16%)	70 (74%)	0.82	11 (12%)	80 (85%)	0.88
During lockdown	59 (62%)	36 (38%)	0.38	22 (23%)	73 (77%)	0.77	12 (13%)	82 (86%)	0.87	9 (9%)	85 (89%)	0.90
Difference			0.28			−0.06			−0.05			−0.02

[#] The sample size for the questionnaire is sufficiently large to enable inferential statistical analysis, thereby revealing the significance of observed changes. The null hypothesis (H0) posits that the mean gender score for the primary houseworker remains consistent before and during the lockdown. A two-tailed *t*-test was employed to test this hypothesis. Significance is indicated at *** $p < 0.01$.

Drawing upon in-depth interview data, the analysis reveals a key complexity: changes in household structure have notable effects on the division of domestic labor across the two periods examined. Specifically, households that changed their living arrangements during the lockdown displayed a more complicated dynamic. The shifts in the number of family members of different genders may have prompted adjustments in domestic labor allocation beyond simple redistribution among existing members.

To offer a clear portrayal of these effects, I have categorized the households based on the interview data. Generally, two distinct groups emerged concerning household structural changes: The first consists of families that downsized during the lockdown, accounting for five households; the second group comprises families that experienced reunions, totaling 24 households. Excluding these particular groups, the remaining 66 interviewees came from households that maintained a stable structure throughout the time frames under examination. Among these, 14 were not part of inter-generational co-residing households in either time frame.

In addition to these structure-based classifications, a separate subgroup emerged, consisting of families that had once employed domestic helpers. This subgroup introduced unique complexities in the division of domestic labor during the lockdown, primarily due to the loss of access to paid assistance, which could potentially influence the type and extent of family members' domestic responsibilities.

Before the lockdown, household work was highly unequal, with females primarily responsible for most tasks. Men in these households were somewhat more involved in tasks like grocery shopping and cooking, but this was the case in only approximately one-third of the families surveyed. These findings align with existing research on the gender-based division of household labor in China under normal circumstances. For

instance, a study conducted in Beijing revealed that women were responsible for the bulk of all surveyed household chores (Zuo and Bian 2001). Similarly, a cross-national comparative study indicated that 83% of Chinese women were in charge of meal preparation, 57% handled laundry, and 69% performed domestic cleaning on a daily basis. In stark contrast, fewer than 12% of Chinese men engaged in meal preparation or laundry, and a mere 17% contributed to daily household cleaning activities (Kan and Hertog 2017). Adding to this body of evidence, a recent study by Peng and Wu (2022), based on a national representative sample, disclosed that Chinese women spent, on average, 67% more time on household chores compared to their male counterparts. Intriguingly, the current sample—which skews toward a more educated demographic often presumed to espouse more egalitarian views on gender roles—did not markedly diverge from these well-established patterns in the actual allocation of household responsibilities, at least before the lockdown was implemented.

Nonetheless, a particular subsample is noteworthy: families that had employed domestic helpers showed a more balanced, and at times male-biased, division of household duties. In such households, the domestic helpers mainly took on cleaning, grocery shopping, and cooking tasks. As a result, aside from laundry, only a minor proportion of these families indicated that female members were principally responsible for the remaining household chores, as Table 3 details.

Table 3. Percentage of female family members as primary houseworkers in household with (*w*) and without (*w/o*) paid helpers. A positive-value change rate indicates women's increased responsibilities during lockdowns and vice versa.

Who Was the Primary Houseworker?	**Shopping**		**Cooking**		**Cleaning**		**Laundry**	
Paid House Helpers	***w***	***w/o***	***w***	***w/o***	***w***	***w/o***	***w***	***w/o***
Before lockdown	25%	64%	38%	65%	n/a [1]	72%	75%	81%
During lockdown	55%	37%	60%	67%	78%	75%	83%	81%
Rate of change	120%	−43%	58%	4%	/	4%	11%	0
Obs	10	85	10	85	10	85	10	85

[1]: All cases with hired house helpers reported cleaning was outsourced, so no family members were primary houseworkers before the lockdown.

During the lockdown, changes in domestic division varied across household tasks according to gender and generation. Overall, four distinct gender-specific patterns emerged concerning the increase in household labor. First, among the families that experienced changes, men substantially increased their grocery shopping participation during the lockdown, whereas women assumed greater responsibilities in cooking, cleaning, and laundry. Second, the transition to domestic insourcing disproportionately increased the domestic workload for women compared to men. Third, in multi-generational households—irrespective of any structural changes—there was a reported uptick in household chores performed by the younger generation during the lockdown. However, these generational shifts were also gender-specific: responsibilities for grocery shopping transitioned to younger men, while cooking, cleaning, and laundry duties were predominantly shifted to younger women. Finally, in households that experienced downsizing, the onus for all tasks invariably shifted to younger-generation women.

Male family members considerably increased their involvement in grocery shopping. In most cases (61% in the questionnaire sample and 62% in the interview sample), male family members were the primary shoppers, and about half of these men were not the primary shoppers before the pandemic. Even in households that relied primarily on online shopping during the lockdown (seven households), the majority (five households) reported that their male family members were responsible for picking up deliveries from outside (i.e., a designated area in the neighborhood), while women made the orders. In contrast, men's participation in cooking, cleaning, and laundry decreased during the lockdowns.

Among families who transitioned to domestic insourcing due to the loss of paid helpers, the bulk of the additional housework predominantly fell upon women. As a result, the gender parity observed before the lockdown disintegrated. Women assumed a larger share of responsibilities in households that had previously employed domestic helpers compared to those that had not, as Table 3 evidences. Interestingly, the previously noted trend of men taking on more shopping duties did not persist in households that had once hired helpers. In these settings, women were primarily tasked with roles previously managed by domestic staff. This pattern may indicate the existing gender segregation commonly seen in the domestic help industry. Indeed, all interviewed households that had employed helpers—primarily for cleaning but sometimes for a range of tasks—reported their outsourced labor force to be female, except for non-routine, heavy-duty chores such as deep cleaning kitchen ventilation systems. This suggests that women reclaimed tasks that had been previously outsourced, highlighting the persistent gender disparity in domestic labor. Contrastingly, no gender segregation was observed in handling additional tasks that emerged due to circumstances such as the pandemic or lockdown. Both male and female family members were reportedly involved in these responsibilities.

These gender-based redistribution patterns in housework involve bidirectional shifts between men and women. Specifically, men have increasingly assumed shopping responsibilities previously held by women, while women have primarily taken over the other three tasks—cooking, cleaning, and laundry—from men. This reallocation is nuanced by intersectional variations in both gender and generational roles across different household chores, as Table 4 details.

In multi-generational households that retained stable structures during the lockdown, chores generally shifted toward younger men, particularly in the realm of shopping. Conversely, younger women took on a larger share of other household duties. When men were identified as the primary individuals responsible for cooking and cleaning—no cases were reported for laundry—they were more often from an older generation during the lockdown period than before. These shifts in both gender and generational roles are also present in households that experienced reunification during the lockdown. A notable difference here is that, while fewer in number, shopping tasks performed by female family members during the lockdown were primarily undertaken by women from the younger generation. Finally, among the few households that downsized during the pandemic, the reallocation of household chores was overwhelmingly skewed toward younger women across all categories of tasks.

Table 4. Generational shifts in multi-generational households. Mean values for generations are reported, with the number of observations for each category. The generation of the respondent is denoted as 0; one or two generations older are indicated as 1 or 2, respectively, and one generation younger is indicated as −1.

I. Stable Multi-Generational Households (52 Households)								
The Generation of Primary Houseworker	**Shopping**		**Cooking**		**Cleaning**		**Laundry**	
	Male Houseworker	**Female Houseworker**	**Male Houseworker**	**Female Houseworker**	**Male Houseworker**	**Female Houseworker**	**Male Houseworker**	**Female Houseworker**
Before lockdown	0.88	0.63	0.75	0.78	0.67	0.64	n/a	0.70
Obs.	8	34	8	38	6	39	0	47
During lockdown	0.73	0.64	0.89	0.66	0.83	0.58	1	0.60
Obs.	22	22	9	38	6	44	1	49
Generational change	Younger	No Change	Older	Younger	Older	Younger	N/A	Younger

Table 4. *Cont.*

II. Households Experiencing Reunion (24 Households)								
The Generation of Primary Houseworker	**Shopping**		**Cooking**		**Cleaning**		**Laundry**	
	Male Houseworker	**Female Houseworker**	**Male Houseworker**	**Female Houseworker**	**Male Houseworker**	**Female Houseworker**	**Male Houseworker**	**Female Houseworker**
Before lockdown	1	0.71	0.8	0.8	0.67	0.75	n/a	0.75
Obs.	4	17	5	17	3	18	0	20
During lockdown	0.93	0.57	1	0.76	1	0.72	n/a	0.73
Obs.	15	7	3	20	3	20	0	22
Generational change	Younger	Younger	Older	Younger	Older	Younger	N/A	Younger
III. Households Experiencing Separation (5 Households)								
The Generation of Primary Houseworker	**Shopping**		**Cooking**		**Cleaning**		**Laundry**	
	Male Houseworker	**Female Houseworker**	**Male Houseworker**	**Female Houseworker**	**Male Houseworker**	**Female Houseworker**	**Male Houseworker**	**Female Houseworker**
Before lockdown	n/a	0.67	n/a	0.5	1	0.33	n/a	0.5
Obs.	0	3	0	4	(1)	3	0	3
During lockdown	n/a	−0.5	n/a	−0.2	0	−0.25	n/a	−0.33
Obs.	0	2	0	5	1	4	0	4
Generational change	N/A	Younger	N/A	Younger	Younger	Younger	N/A	Younger

7.2. Theme 2: Why Reallocated Housework?

When queried about the redistribution of housework during the pandemic, participants cited gender-specific reasons. These responses underscored the concept of 'doing gender,' where both female and male family members reinforced their gender roles through increased or decreased housework contributions in the changed circumstances.

Narrated reasons for men's increased participation in housework included anxiety/fear, distance/mobility, physical strength, selective preferences, and low-quality demands. This increase was mainly seen during the early stages of lockdowns, where households in urban areas took advantage of quota-controlled leaving policies to go grocery shopping. Men's increased involvement in grocery shopping and delivery picking was attributed to other family members' anxiety and fear, particularly with health concerns articulated in the explanations (e.g., pregnant women, young children, or other health-related considerations). Additionally, men's strength and mobility advantages were noted to explain their increased share when shopping was restricted to fewer trips or nearby markets were closed. For instance, F04 (18 yrs) remembered her father's uncommon initiative to go grocery shopping during the pandemic to protect her and her mother, especially as her college entrance exam was approaching. F63 (33 yrs) attributed her husband's delivery picking activities to cold weather and fear of the virus. F45 (28 yrs), a single woman living with her parents and younger sister during the lockdown, recalled her father as the primary shopper because "he drove and could carry more stuff." M21 (31 yrs), reunited with his parents during the lockdown, shopped with his father instead of his mother, who was the primary shopper at the usual time. He explained their labor division: "[N]earby markets and stores were all closed. My dad drove to a supermarket farther away, and I was responsible for carrying stuff."

Thus, the pandemic context may have temporarily altered the gender label associated with grocery shopping, allowing men to demonstrate bravery, responsibility, mobility, and strength, consistent with traditional masculine attributes. This temporary masculinization of the grocery shopping task resulted in an increase in men's domestic participation,

aligning with the concept of 'doing gender.' Similar results have been found in pandemic-related household research conducted in Italy, Britain, and America (Biroli et al. 2021).

In addition to being viewed as chivalrous or strong, other justifications made for men's increased housework participation during the lockdowns paradoxically focused on men's perceived inferiority in domestic chores, such as the lowered demand for quality or the occupation of female family members with more demanding domestic tasks, leaving men to handle the easier ones. For instance, F45 (28 yrs) noted, "Our [food] appetite was small then, so the shopping was relatively simple. . . It should not be stressful for him (her father) because we only needed a few kinds of stuff".

Despite this increase in "easier" housework, it is still consistent with traditional masculinity. Similarly, women's uptake of "tough" work aligns with the notion of femininity. This finding is consistent with Voßemer and Heyne's (2019) study, which showed that both men and women spent more time on housework when staying home longer, but their division of labor was based on gender. From this perspective, the type of housework performed may be more important than the overall time spent on housework in displaying and affirming gender roles.

Narrated reasons for women's increased participation in housework included the high quality, greater time availability, difficulty delegating or managing tasks, reduced household workload, and compensation for others' domestic labor. These justifications were more nuanced and complex than those for men, likely due to the social perception of routine domestic activities as feminine and women's involvement being taken for granted without the need for justification.

In contrast to men perceived as incompetent, female family members' increased participation in domestic tasks was often justified by their superior skills and competence. For example, one prominent reason for women's increased cooking contribution during the lockdown was the presence of picky eaters at home, especially for experienced female houseworkers whose skills and completion quality had been recognized.

The competence explanation was also applied to some female family members who took on new household responsibilities during the lockdown, even if they had not performed those before. For instance, F62 (34 yrs), an office clerk with rudimentary cooking skills before the pandemic, began contributing more actively to meal preparation by leveraging cooking apps for guidance. She eventually became the sole cook in her household as her culinary efforts were deemed superior to those of other family members. During the interview, F62 shared pictures of her cooking to demonstrate the quality and commented, "My daughter said they were better than restaurant food".

The competence explanations for women's increased participation in housework were not limited to cooking but were also present in other household tasks. Female family members were perceived to have more elaborate routines in doing specific tasks, resulting in perceived better quality and justifying their increased housework load when all were available. For example, respondents compared the laundry practices of female family members (e.g., completely handwashing, handwashing before machine washing, or separate laundry for underwear and outerwear) to those of men (e.g., single-load machine laundry) to exemplify women's perceived superiority in completing housework. Implicit in these explanations is that women had more available time during the lockdown, which allowed them to take on more domestic responsibilities with perceived higher quality than they had been able to manage before when their market work or other activities had occupied their time.

Time availability was also explicitly acknowledged as a factor in explaining women's increased household labor, especially for those young or middle-aged groups who were full-time employed before the lockdown. For example, F10 (33 yrs), a manager of a transnational company and a mother of a kindergartener, had previously faced challenges balancing work and family life, leaving her with limited time for household chores. However, when her child and parents—the primary houseworkers at the usual time—left the city for their hometown due to safety concerns, F10 found herself in an unusual situation with

newfound time. With neither work nor child-rearing to consume her days, she took on the full spectrum of domestic chores.

On the other hand, the explanation of time availability was not explicitly used to justify men's increased participation in household labor. On the contrary, the lack of time was often cited as a reason for men's previous lack of involvement. F01 (38 yrs) described a conflict with her parents over the distribution of household chores when they all lived together in her parents' house.

> My parents did all the housework... Maybe that was too much, six people under a roof for a long time, they grumbled to me at my husband's laziness and urged me to ask him to do some [housework]... My husband was very busy [in the usual time]—almost 200 days out of one year, either abroad or in the sky—so I didn't ask him [to help with the housework] to give him a break. However, my parents saw no moves from him, [so] they were irritated and kept coming to me.

Similarly, M18 (29 yrs) provided insight into the lack of housework redistribution between his parents when they were both at home: "My father works at a forest reserve, so he's rarely at home. When he does return, he prefers to rest and leaves all the housework to my mom." The prior absence of men was often cited to excuse their limited housework contributions. Interestingly, having more time during the lockdown did not lead to an expansion of their duties, as their wives were also at home. Instead, their previous unavailability was used to rationalize their continued lack of involvement as a form of compensation. While having more time is necessary for increasing domestic contributions, it alone seems insufficient to expand men's housework responsibilities. Even in the absence of economic activities during the lockdown, the influence of existing financial resources and power structures persisted in the division of household tasks, resulting in a lack of meaningful change.

Women's increased participation was also attributed to the exhaustion from managing housework alongside family members who were passive or unwilling to offer help. When asked if male family members increased their household labor while at home, F66 (36 yrs) likened her husband to an "abacus bead" that did not move unless being moved.

> F66: He hid in the study (and wouldn't come out) unless you called him or came out only around mealtime.
>
> Q: So, did you increase your housework load at that time?
>
> F66: Yes, I was also at home, ain't I?
>
> Q: Was there any agreement, or did you initiate taking housework? Why did you increase your undertakings?
>
> F66: No agreement. It's like you had to call him, or he wouldn't do (housework), so I was too lazy to call. I'd rather save the effort to do (the housework) myself.
>
> Q: So he was not very active (in doing housework)?
>
> F66: No. [He was behaving] like an abacus bead that only moves when you move it.
>
> Q: Do you also plan (household) tasks at the usual time? Does he do any?
>
> F66: Basically, yes. If you ask him, he will, but if you don't ask, he won't even bother looking at it.

If expanding the definition of housework to include organizational and cognitive tasks such as recognizing housework needs, coordinating schedules, planning meals, managing shopping lists and/or housekeepers, and monitoring finish quality, it becomes clear that female family members were heavily burdened with these responsibilities, as observed across the researched periods. This type of labor, though often invisible, underscores women's critical role in organizing daily domestic life (Daminger 2019; Risman 2011). Zimmerman et al. (2002) coined the term "household quarterback" to describe this role, while men are

often seen as providing support and only assisting women when the workload becomes overwhelming.

Female respondents reported taking on even more housework during the pandemic lockdown to alleviate the burden of organizational and cognitive labor. This finding suggests that such invisible labor can be energy-draining and resented (see also Daminger 2019). As a result, female houseworkers preferred hands-on tasks over organizational and cognitive labor when possible, and the lockdown practically increased their ability to complete housework independently by extending their time at home. This discovery confirms the notion of task specialization, with a specific mechanism from women's perspective.

Alongside the challenge of delegating and managing housework with family members, the reduced demand for housework during the lockdown also contributed to women's specialization in household tasks. M21 (31 yrs) reported fewer cleaning demands due to the absence of visiting relatives and friends. F74's (35 yrs) family stopped tidying toys daily (coded as cleaning) when the children were at home, who would quickly mess the toys up again. F59 (61 yrs) reduced her laundry load by skipping all family members' work attire during the job-free time. Consequently, housework sharing was reduced and often fully burdened by female family members.

Women's increased participation in certain tasks during the lockdown was also driven by their perception of fairness or compensation for other family members' increased housework labor. For instance, F77 (57 yrs) took over cleaning from her husband and explained that she was "let[ting] him take a rest for he already worked (for shopping)". Similarly, M21's (31 yrs) mother took care of the remaining housework after M21 and his father went shopping, including mopping the floor (coded as cleaning) and doing laundry that his father previously shared. In other words, primary houseworkers attempted to "balance" the load after other family members carried more than before.

These findings present a novel perspective on fairness and satisfaction in the housework division. Carriero's (2011) distributive justice framework explains why women perceive fairness despite gendered and unequal housework division through two referents: inter-gender (e.g., a wife comparing her load to her husband's) and intra-gender (e.g., a woman comparing herself to other women or her husband to other men) comparisons. However, this study shows that houseworkers perceived the new, more equal division as "unfair" by comparing their own workload before and during the lockdown, thus defending the previous "unequal equity" by taking on tasks from others. This perception of fairness based on self-comparison may result in resistance to changes in housework division, even when other factors (i.e., earnings, time) have changed, as previously noted in research (e.g., Gershuny et al. 2005; Greenstein 2000; Lyonette and Crompton 2015; Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998). The effect was most pronounced among older-generation women, usually the primary houseworkers and organizers, supporting the notion of 'doing gender.' Furthermore, women's pivotal role in housework organization enabled them to control others' assignments while safeguarding their domains, acting as "gatekeepers" of gendered housework.

Narrated reasons for increased participation across all genders concentrated on preference and family reunion but with distinct expressions. For instance, families mentioned leisure or outings solely as the rationale for taking on grocery shopping or delivery picking. After being confined at home—mostly in small apartments—for an extended period, some families highly desired the opportunity to go out.

> Except for me, [my family] fell over each other with going out. . . At last, it turned out to be a competition of getting up early, [because] who could get up earlier would take the pass to leave.
>
> (F45, 28 yrs)

> I am good at shopping. [So] I made the (online) orders, and he (the husband) was responsible for picking them up as couriers couldn't get into our unit. He could grasp the chance to enjoy some cigarettes on the way.

(F10, 33 yrs)

Even though this rationale was classified gender-neutral as it was identified in justifications for workload taken by all genders, it was more likely to be applied to male family members, perhaps because they were primarily responsible for shopping or delivery pickup during lockdowns.

Interest in cooking was a reason for increased participation among family members during the lockdown, observed in eight cases (six females and two males), who often received social rewards for their contribution. For example, F62 (34 yrs), who learned cooking from apps and was appreciated by her daughter, stated, "Just follow (the instructions given by) the apps. [It's] very interesting and fulfilling after you finish them." Since female family members predominantly performed cooking, the interest was skewed toward explaining women's increased participation, particularly for those young or middle-aged who were previously unavailable for the activity before the lockdown.

Generational Differences in the redistribution of household chores emerged among multi-generational families during the lockdown period. These shifts occurred irrespective of whether families had recently reunited or lived together before the lockdown. Specifically, when the primary individual responsible for household chores was male, there was a shift in roles during family reunions: the younger generation primarily took over the task of grocery shopping, while the older generation assumed cooking and cleaning, albeit in very few cases (refer to Table 4 for details). Conversely, when the primary houseworker was female, the responsibility for all examined chores consistently shifted toward the younger generation.

The reasons cited for these changes are consistent with the aforementioned gender divisions. Emphasis was often placed on the physical strength, bravery, and health of younger male family members when grocery shopping was assigned during the pandemic. Conversely, the increased availability of younger female family members was frequently noted as the rationale for their assumption of other household chores.

Goldscheider and Lawton (1998) posit that living in a multi-generational household can reinforce traditional gender norms within the family structure. As observed, while most household chores are traditionally considered feminine, the role of grocery shopping has been masculinized in this particular context. This strengthening of conventional gender roles may have influenced younger family members to conform to these norms, resulting in women assuming a greater share of domestic responsibilities and men reducing their involvement in all tasks except grocery shopping. The more balanced participation of older generations, especially among male family members, aligns with the concept of de-gendering in later life stages (Silver 2003). This suggests that the expression of masculinity among older men is generally less emphasized compared to their younger counterparts, leading to unique intergenerational patterns in the distribution of household chores between genders.

The reallocation of housework during lockdowns revealed the manifestation of 'doing gender' in individual, interactive, and institutional contexts, affecting the use of increased time availability for housework. Increased time availability enabled women to take on more household responsibilities, but additional changes may be necessary to increase men's participation. During China's pandemic lockdown, the temporary masculinization of grocery shopping resulted in a dramatic increase in male housework participation, but only in shopping activities.

Women's time availability enabled them to specialize in domestic tasks for their perceived better-quality household services or reduce the organizational and cognitive labor required for timely tasks. This underscores the gender-based division of household labor, where women serve as the main contributors. As the contributions from these main contributors grew due to either additional available time or a decrease in their domestic workload, the need for supplemental contributors, generally men, lessened. This led to a reduction in shared domestic responsibilities across all activities except for grocery shopping.

During the lockdown period, the increase in domestic labor performed by younger women was commonly attributed to their greater availability, owing to a reduction in external work commitments and other activities.

In multi-generational households, the distribution of household chores was significantly biased toward the younger generation. More precisely, younger men predominantly assumed the responsibility of grocery shopping, while younger women were chiefly tasked with other domestic duties. In this particular context, grocery shopping has taken on a masculine connotation, whereas other household tasks continue to be perceived as traditionally feminine. This accentuated division of labor underscores the concept of 'doing gender' among younger family members, particularly when cohabiting with older relatives.

When put into context, it becomes evident that the notion of 'doing gender' serves as a pivotal factor in shaping the allocation of household responsibilities for both men and women, even when men exhibit increased participation in certain chores.

In contrast to existing research, the current study provides a unique lens on this issue by focusing on the initial period of China's stringent lockdown, which coincided with the Spring Festival—a time when employment status was largely stable while productive activities were on hold. This setting allowed us to exclude the effect of economic status as a variable influencing the division of household labor. Surprisingly, even when economic factors were controlled for, traditional gender patterns persisted.

The findings of this study challenge the commonly held belief that economic considerations play a significant role in dictating the gender-based division of household chores. In the absence of economic fluctuations and participation, the persistence of traditional domestic labor roles can more directly be attributed to ingrained gender norms. The lockdown, in this case, served as an unencumbered platform for the manifestation of these deeply rooted gender norms, free from the usual time constraints that might otherwise intervene.

8. Conclusions

The lockdowns in China during the COVID-19 pandemic offered a valuable opportunity to observe changes in household labor when all genders were homebound and job-free while employment status remained constant. This mixed-method study investigated patterns and reasons for housework reallocation in a unique context.

Housework sharing increased during the lockdown, but only men's participation in grocery shopping increased significantly while other routine duties like cooking, cleaning, and laundry decreased. This gender-task pattern was mirrored in multi-generational households, where younger family members were more likely to assume these roles. Notably, when domestic tasks were insourced, the burden of housework increased more substantially for women than men.

Regarding reasons for reallocation, the study found that 'doing gender' had dominant effects through increased time availability and task specialization. Although necessary for increased housework participation, time availability alone was only sufficient to increase women's household workload, particularly those who were full-time employed. Men's participation required additional changes, such as masculinizing domestic tasks or female family members' time constraints. The unique context of China's pandemic lockdowns temporarily relabeled grocery shopping with traditional masculine attributes, increasing men's participation alongside increased time availability. The perceived gender-based difference in household labor quality, the difficulty in delegating housework, and the reduced workload facilitated women's task specialization and increased their participation while all genders were available. The notion of 'doing gender' played a pivotal role in shaping the gendered distribution of housework across generations.

This study corroborates that the housework reallocation during China's stringent lockdowns mirrored trends observed in other nations, where changes in employment status were considered a significant factor in the gender-based division of housework. This affirmation strengthens the premise of the 'doing gender' thesis as a dominant factor

in dictating the distribution of housework, irrespective of changes in time, economic parameters, or the lack thereof.

As a pioneering study exploring gender and generational housework reallocation during an urgent crisis, this research has various limitations. First, the workload information relies entirely on respondents' retrospective reporting, inherently introducing recall biases and potential distortions due to reporting habits (Kan 2008). However, using a qualitative probing method, asking about the primary housework provider, may reduce such inaccuracies compared to strategies detailing hours spent on household activities. Still, this approach only captures significant changes, not the subtler adjustments that may be more prevalent, making the second shortcoming.

Additionally, the study's samples are skewed toward female participants, which presents another concern. The insights drawn from interview narratives are likely biased, disproportionately reflecting women's perspectives on domestic labor.

Next, this study consciously excludes childcare despite acknowledging its substantial influence on housework reallocation. While several instances demonstrate the intertwined decision-making process of childcare and housework divisions, I chose not to incorporate childcare due to its inherent complexity and potential to distract from the main focus of the study. Theoretically, decisions regarding childcare and housework may be underpinned by different dynamics, with housework often perceived as a more feminine and less enjoyable task (Sullivan 2013). Not all households in the current sample bore childcare responsibilities, yet all had housework tasks. Moreover, childcare requirements significantly shift with a child's age and developmental stage, necessitating varying care providers. Despite these considerations, this paper does not encompass the full scope of domestic activities, which merits separate, in-depth exploration. A separate analysis focusing on childcare duties found that households with young children exhibited a less equitable division of housework, a disparity that was further exacerbated during the lockdown.

Another limitation lies in the varying durations of lockdowns and the dynamic nature of household divisions. As the lockdown extended, the division of household tasks may have shifted. Unfortunately, this study's retrospective approach does not allow tracking of these potential fluctuations over time. A possible post hoc strategy could involve distinguishing between respondents residing in areas enduring extended lockdowns and those who did not. After applying this strategy and excluding respondents who reported living in Hubei province, Beijing, or Tianjin during the lockdown (refer to Table A1), the pattern of changes remained consistent, suggesting that the lockdown duration did not substantially influence the overall trends in the housework division, as measured by the role of primary houseworkers (detailed results available upon request).

Finally, as noted in the Sample Distribution section, the current samples are biased toward highly educated individuals, potentially inflating their representativeness of China's broader population. Higher education levels are often associated with greater resource access and progressive gender ideologies. Although the division of housework in the samples was consistent with nationally representative data before the lockdown, this skew could still influence how housework was reallocated during the lockdown period. Consequently, it is important to recognize that this sample bias might portray a level of gender equality higher than the general population.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Duration of Tier-1 lockdowns responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in mainland China.

Code	Provincial Unit	Close Date *	Reopen Date *	Lockdown Duration
1	Beijing	23 January 2020	30 April 2020	98
2	Chongqing	24 January 2020	1 March 2020	47
3	Shanghai	24 January 2020	24 March 2020	60
4	Tianjin	24 January 2020	30 April 2020	97
5	Anhui	27 January 2020	25 February 2020	32
6	Fujian	24 January 2020	27 February 2020	34
7	Guangdong	23 January 2020	24 February 2020	32
8	Gansu	25 January 2020	21 February 2020	27
9	Guangxi	24 January 2020	24 February 2020	31
10	Guizhou	24 January 2020	24 February 2020	31
11	Henan	25 January 2020	19 March 2020	54
12	Hubei	24 January 2020	2 May 2020	99
13	Hebei	24 January 2020	3 April 2020	70
14	Hainan	25 January 2020	26 February 2020	32
15	Heilongjiang	25 January 2020	5 March 2020	40
16	Hunan	24 January 2020	11 March 2020	47
17	Jilin	25 January 2020	26 February 2020	32
18	Jiangsu	25 January 2020	24 February 2020	30
19	Jiangxi	24 January 2020	12 March 2020	48
20	Liaoning	25 January 2020	22 February 2020	28
21	Inner Mongolia	25 January 2020	25 February 2020	31
22	Ningxia	25 January 2020	28 February 2020	34
23	Qinghai	26 January 2020	26 February 2020	31
24	Sichuan	24 January 2020	26 February 2020	33
25	Shandong	24 January 2020	8 March 2020	44
26	Shaanxi	25 January 2020	28 February 2020	34
27	Shanxi	25 January 2020	23 February 2020	29
28	Xinjiang	25 January 2020	26 February 2020	32
29	Tibet	30 January 2020	7 March 2020	37
30	Yunnan	24 January 2020	24 February 2020	31
31	Zhejiang	23 January 2020	1 March 2020	38

* Information was gathered by monitoring and tracking the announcements made by each provincial Center for Disease Control and Prevention. The table presented has been adapted and modified from the working paper titled "Pandemic Lockdowns and Trust in Local Government in China" by Ting Wang, Bing Ye, and Yucong Zhao.

Table A2. Core questions in questionnaire.

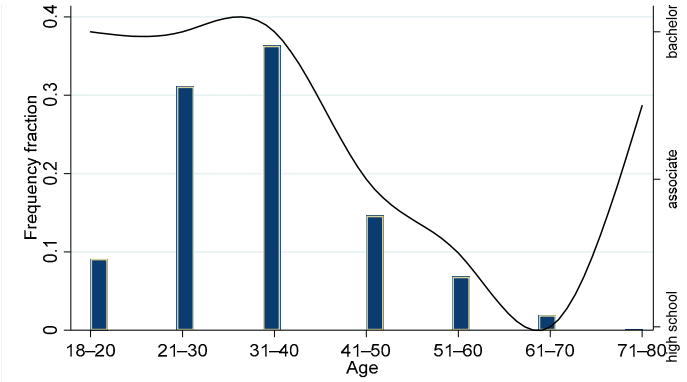
	Question	Choices (Single)
Overall change in the housework division	During the COVID-19 lockdowns in early 2020, was the housework division more equal between genders?	a. More equal than before. b. Less equal than before. c. Same as before.
	(If the answer to the preceding question is either option a or b) The housework division was more/less equal during the lockdowns because	a. Male family members did more housework. b. Female family members did more housework. c. Others (specify).
Activity-specific change	Before the lockdown, who did most cooking/cleaning/shopping/laundry?	a. Male family member(s). b. Female family member(s). c. Others (specify).
	During the lockdown, who did most cooking/cleaning/shopping/laundry?	a. Male family member(s). b. Female family member(s). c. Others (specify).

Appendix B. Survey and Interview Sample Comparison

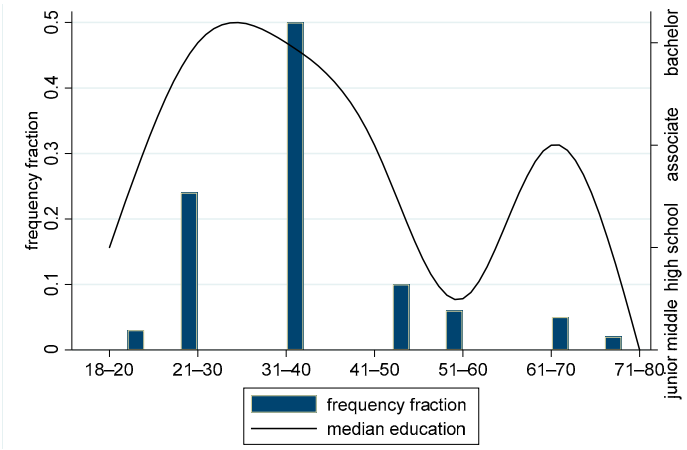
Both the survey and interview samples were primarily constituted of middle-aged respondents (31 to 40 years old, as Figure A1 shows). The average level of education was found to rise with younger cohorts, aligning with China's historical trend of educational restoration and expansion post 1976. A secondary peak in median education was observed among older cohorts in both samples. Although more educated seniors were likely better equipped to adapt to the digital era and respond to the survey than their less educated contemporaries, the cohort size was insufficient to achieve statistical significance.

Upon examining by gender, most questionnaire respondents and male interviewees reported spending the majority of their childhood in rural areas or suburbs, reflecting China's extensive rural-to-urban migration and urbanization in recent decades (see Table A3). Over one-quarter of both female and male questionnaire respondents, and over 40% of female and male interviewees, were single children. This demographic was primarily 40 years old or younger, reflecting the one-child policy officially introduced in 1980. The majority of respondents for both the questionnaire and interviews were either currently or previously married and had children. The most common academic qualification was a bachelor's degree, held by 63% of female and 58% of male questionnaire participants, and 60% of female and 64% of male interviewees.

Generally, the interview sample leans more toward female respondents, single children, and individuals who spent their childhood in non-urban areas compared to the survey sample. However, other factors such as education, marital status, and parenthood align closely between the two groups. The interviewee subset is representative of the larger survey sample, given the overlap in distributions for most socioeconomic characteristics.



(**a**) **Questionnaire**



(**b**) **Interview**

Figure A1. Distribution of age and education.

Table A3. Demographic distribution by gender.

a. Questionnaire					
	Childhood rural/suburban residence	Single child	Married/once married	Having child(ren)	Bachelor's or higher degrees
Women/950	55%	28%	62%	57%	63%
Men/719	61%	26%	70%	69%	58%
b. Interview					
	Childhood rural/suburban residence	Single child	Married/once married	Having child(ren)	Bachelor's or higher degrees
Women/78	32%	40%	74%	63%	60%
Men/22	55%	41%	64%	59%	64%

Notes

[1] Measures of hours spent on housework are commonly used in retrospective studies examining the division of domestic labor. However, such metrics proved to be suboptimal for the present study, based on the results of the pilot survey. This limitation may be attributed to the lack of a structured work schedule, which affects respondents' ability to account for time spent on domestic tasks accurately.

[2] The overrepresentation of female respondents in this study aligns with existing literature that highlights gender disparities in the perception and reporting of domestic tasks (Crompton and Lyonette 2011; Kan 2008). The sample mirrors these gender-based variations, particularly in task-specific contexts. It is important to note that while these gender-based reporting biases are present, they do not significantly skew the results of other measured variables in the study (detailed results are available upon request).

[3] In the ATLAS software, 'grounded' indicates the frequency with which a code has been applied, while 'density' represents the number of connections between entities. A code with a low 'grounded' score is generally considered to be an outlier or an isolated case, whereas a code with low 'density' is often deemed as less relevant. For this study, the criteria were set at a minimum of 4 for 'grounded' and 3 for 'density.'

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A Tale of Two Realities: Gendered Workspace during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Taipei

Chyi-Rong Tsai

Department of Sociology, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712, USA; crtsai@utexas.edu

Abstract: This study examines how heterosexual couples in Taipei used space when both were working from home. I interviewed 29 heterosexual couples on how they arranged working space at home and how these spatial arrangements influenced their working experiences and career development. I found that space was gendered: men tended to work in a preferable space at home compared to their partners. However, a preferable space was not always defined by its physical setting, such as a room. Interviews revealed that women tended to move around to accommodate their family members' needs when they worked from home, having unstable and interrupted working environments. Their experiences revealed that women's family roles, such as mother, daughter, and wife, are prioritized at home, resulting in constant interruptions. On the contrary, men's roles as workers were prioritized and protected when they worked from home. Gender superseded and transformed the physical space and reproduced gender inequality at work for people who work from home. This study suggests the need to consider the impact of gender norms before treating remote work as a pro-work–family policy.

Keywords: remote work; gender inequality; gender and space; work–family conflict; work–family balance

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1. Introduction

1.1. Remote Work and Gender Inequality

Remote work has been proposed to be an efficient way to facilitate flexibility in integrating home activities with paid work to reconcile the severe work–family conflicts in industrial countries (Correll et al. 2014; Kaduk et al. 2019; Lui and Chang 2020; Mas and Pallais 2017). Nevertheless, researchers have raised concerns that remote work, especially working from home, might reinforce traditional gender roles and exacerbate gender inequality (Anderson and Kelliher 2020; Brescoll et al. 2013; Cannito and Scavarda 2020; Chung and Van Der Horst 2018; Dunatchik et al. 2021; Glass and Noonan 2016; Hardill and Green 2003; Lott and Chung 2016; Lyttelton et al. 2020, 2022, 2023).

While remote work has increased men's involvement in housework and childcare, research has shown that gender inequality at home endures. Studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that although fathers increased their contributions to childcare responsibilities and housework (Carlson et al. 2022; Frize et al. 2021; Rodríguez Sánchez et al. 2021; Shockley et al. 2021), mothers also increased time spent on housework and childcare. As a result, the preexisting gender gap persisted or even increased (Dunatchik et al. 2021; Lyttelton et al. 2020, 2022, 2023; Yavorsky et al. 2021). Remote work blurs the boundaries between work and home, which disproportionately increases women's need to multitask and the frequency work interruptions. Working from home reduces the quality of a mother's work and increases their stress relative to fathers (Cannito and Scavarda 2020; Lyttelton et al. 2020; Offer and Schneider 2011; Rodríguez Sánchez et al. 2021).

Regarding paid work, Glass (2004) indicates that mothers with young children experience stagnated wage growth when working from home. Although remote work has been advocated to help mothers reconcile work and family, it inadvertently contributes to the

motherhood penalty, such that there are lower wages for mothers compared to women without children. Besides its influence on the gender wage gap, research shows that women often sacrifice investment in paid work in order to juggle the balance between mothers and workers when working from home, while men devote the time they saved from commuting to work (Cannito and Scavarda 2020).

Adding to the debate, remote work requires that workers have an appropriate working space and equipment at home. Such a conducive work environment is usually inaccessible for women, especially mothers. Little of the literature has focused on domestic space allocation for remote working couples. One exception is Waismel-Manor et al. (2021), who demonstrated that men claim the independent room when they work from home, thus having a physical separation between house chores and childcare. By contrast, women work in the middle of the house, having to do both at the same time. Their findings are in line with the gendered logic in organizational space: that private and spacious offices are allocated to masculine or managerial roles, and small, open spaces to feminine roles, such as nurses and secretaries (Paliadelis 2013; Spain 1993; Wasserman 2012). The open working space for women often lacks privacy and is visible to others, which dictates how the female body must be managed through gendered norms (Hirst and Schwabenland 2018).

However, the spatial allocation delineated by Waismel-Manor et al. (2021) is based on a typical Western context, where the nuclear family is the major family type and there is often a study room in the house, which may not be applicable to other social contexts with multi-generational families or more populated places. Living with other family members might influence gender dynamics in different ways. On the one hand, the presence of other family members might intensify the social norms of gender roles. On the other hand, other family members might share the housework and, especially, childcare responsibilities. The help could contribute to a better environment for working mothers to work from home. This research explores how heterosexual couples arrange workspace at home in Taipei, where multi-generational families are common, and the presence of a study room in the house is rare. This study aims to investigate the spatial allocation among couples working from home. Many of them lived with other family members and received assistance from them. By doing so, this study contributes to existing findings by revealing a different, yet still gendered, spatial allocation among couples, and how this allocation disadvantages women, irrespective of whether they claim an independent room for work.

1.2. Gender Inequality in Taiwan

Taiwan has experienced "compressed modernity" (Chang 2011) a process in which economic, political and/or cultural changes occur rapidly and extensively. As a result, the traditional cultural heritage in Confucianism characterized by hierarchy and rigid gendered marital roles (Slote and De Vos 1998; Tsuya and Bumpass 2004) coexists with modern egalitarian ideologies.

The traditional gender beliefs reflect on domestic division of labor. In Taiwan, working women spend over three times the amount of time on average doing housework compared to working men in 2016. In addition, mothers are seen as primary caregivers of children. Therefore, a high proportion of women leave the labor market after bearing children (Chen and Yi 2005). The profoundly gendered expectations of women are exemplified by the M-shaped curve of women's labor force participation: their labor force participation rate peaks prior to marriage, followed by a decline after getting married, and further drops during pregnancy and/or childbirth. However, it later rises again when approximately half of those who had previously left the workforce return to work (Lui and Chang 2020).

However, among East Asian countries which are under the cultural umbrella of Confucianism, Taiwan has a smaller wage gap, a more egalitarian labor distribution, and more egalitarian attitudes (Tompkins 2011). Economically, married women's labor force participation has been higher in Taiwan compared to its counterpart in Japan. Yu (2009) argues that the smaller size of organizations, the significant demand for labor after World War II, and the availability of childcare assistance from kin networks all contribute to

Taiwanese married women finding it easier to return to full-time jobs compared to Japanese women. Therefore, achieving a work–family balance is an important issue for Taiwanese women. Gender wage gaps are also lower in Taiwan than in Japan and Korea (Chang and England 2011). Combining this with increased access to higher education, women have relatively higher bargaining power in the family (Qian and Sayer 2016).

Politically, Tompkins (2011) claimed that Taiwan has relatively high levels of female representation in the government compared to Japan and South Korea for the early adoption of a gender quota system. Accompanied by flourishing activity in women's and feminist groups, Taiwan successfully revised the family laws to demolish the patriarchal practices in family and enacted the Gender Equality in Employment Law to enhance women's rights and status. These factors facilitated a more egalitarian attitude about gender in Taiwan compared to Japan and South Korea.

In Taiwan, where multiple social norms coexist, the COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in another swift change in work arrangements. How would the gender dynamics, exemplified by space allocation, change when work is brought back into the home? This study identified a static gendered pattern of spatial allocation of remote work: women tended to occupy less preferable workspaces when working from home compared to their male partners. The workspace of women was less preferable for its physical settings and because it was frequently subject to interruptions from other family members, regardless of their location at home. The experiences of physical space were shaped by social expectations of gender roles, thereby being comparative and subjective. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the divergent remote work experiences highlight a tale of two realities: remote work benefiting specific populations while hindering others' productivity. Most of the literature about how remote work influences gender inequality is based on Western contexts, with an emphasis on the nuclear family. This study contributes by (1) illustrating how gender inequality originating at home extended to work through the lens of space and (2) enriching the literature with East Asian contexts to explore how the presence of other family members would influence gender expectations and norms.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Sampling Strategy and Participants

This research asks how heterosexual couples in Taiwan arranged their space when they worked from home together. I sampled heterosexual couples who had the experience of working from home at the same time, either long-term or short-term. I used snowball sampling to recruit interviewees. I posted flyers on social media publicly. Six people contacted me through the flyer. The other six entry points are those who saw the flyer but were not eligible. However, they introduced people they knew were eligible to me, and some introduced more than one interviewee. Six other individuals, although they did not have the experience of remote working with their partners, introduced their acquaintances to me, which constituted six entry points of my snowball sample. They recommended another participants and eventually I recruited 23 interviewees through snowballing. Although snowball sampling sacrifices representativeness, the in-depth interviews and observations allowed me to observe gender dynamics in how couples allocated work spaces. I conducted 29 in-depth interviews of people in 19 households in Taipei[1]. Taipei is a crowded city with high housing costs, with an average apartment costing around 30 times the annual household income (compared to around 20 for Paris, 15 for London, and 10 for New York City) (Cost of Living 2024). Living space in Taipei is not only expensive but also scarce, so it is rare for couples to have a space dedicated to work. Therefore, Taipei presents an extreme case in regard to understanding how people transform the existing space into a working space, how that space is allocated between genders, and how the experience of space might differ by gender.

I followed Small (2009) and applied case logic to see my sample as a set of 29 cases rather than a sample of n = 29. Adopting the case logic, I recruited interviewees based on their contribution to our understanding of space allocation and the gender division of labor.

For example, the relative resources hypothesis (Blood and Wolfe 1960) suggests that men contribute less to housework because they usually make more money than their wives, which gives them more bargaining power in negotiating housework. I therefore recruited couples with wives who make more money than husbands and even included a couple with a husband who was unemployed during the pandemic. The theoretical generalizability of this study relies mainly on the heterogeneity of the sample, which includes variations such as marital status, living arrangements, wife and husband's income, and so on. The characteristics of interviewees are shown in Table 1.

Most of the interviewees were married, except for seven who were cohabiting. All interviewees lived with their partners. Some of the couples lived with their parents or roommates who were not their family members. Continuing to live with parents after adulthood or after marriage is common in Taiwan and other Asian countries. Many couples would live close to their parents even when moving out after marriage. This type of living arrangement makes it easy for grandparents to care for the grandchildren during working hours. Dual-income families in Taiwan often rely on their kin network for childcare (Chen 2000; Hermalin and Yang 2004).

The criterion of having the experience of working from home restricted the sample to non-working-class positions since not everyone had the privilege to work from home, especially while there was no lockdown in Taiwan. According to the Minister of Labor of Taiwan, only 24% of workers were eligible to work remotely fully or partially. They were mostly in managerial positions or were professionals. Among those, individuals working in the tech industry, the IT section of other industries, or in companies with more than 500 employees were more likely to be eligible to work remotely (104 Labor Bank 2023; Minister of Labor 2024). The individuals in my sample shared common demographic features with the broader population of Taiwanese workers who were able to work from home. For example, half of my respondents worked in the tech industry or the IT section in other industries. Every participant earned more than the median income of the city and the majority of them worked in the tech industry or a multinational corporation. All interviewees had completed college education. Sample diversity was pursued by considering various living arrangements. Some of the interviewees lived in rented, compact apartments, while others owned more spacious houses or apartments. Another significant aspect of sample variation that shaped the gendered dynamics was whether participants lived with family members or roommates. Co-habiting with family members could potentially reinforce gendered family roles, whereas sharing living spaces with roommates of a similar age might encourage a more egalitarian environment for space allocation. The presence of children also played a critical role in the gendered processes, given that motherhood and fatherhood are highly gendered. Approximately half of the interviewees had at least one child during their remote work period, and a few of them were pregnant at the time. This facilitated comparisons between those with and without children regarding how childcare influenced their use of space.

Table 1. Interviewees' demographics and working space at home.

Name	Age	Gender	Annual Income (10,000 NTD)	Education	Relationship	Children	Working Space at Home	Residence	Layout
Hazel George	29 28	F M	NA 150–180	MA BA	cohabitated	0	her bedroom with George computer room	rent/another roommate	3B Apt
Stacy Cheng	28 27	F M	100 150	BA BA	married	0	living room/couch study room	owned	3B Apt
Amelia Bond	28 34	F M	100 75	BA MA	married	0	study room living room with no one coming	owned by husband's parents/with husband's parents	5 story duplex
Cathy Jimmy	28 31	F M	70–90 80–100	BA BA	cohabitated	0	bed > living room/bedroom desk > living room/bedroom	rent	studio > 1B
Kevin *	33	M	90	PhD	married	0	his study room her study room	owned	4B Apt
Sunny *	NA	F	80	BA	cohabitated	0	living room bedroom	owned/with one tenant	3B Apt
Anna Blue	27	F M	60–70 130–150	BA BA	cohabitated	0	bedroom bedroom	rent/with 3 other roommates	4B Apt
Hannah *	29	M	70–90	BA	married	pregnancy	bedroom living room	owned by husband's parents/with husband's parents	4B Apt
Joyce *	31	M	100	MA	married	pregnancy	dining room on dining table > living room on camping chair and table computer room, dining room on dining table	rent > rent (in the same building with wife's parents)	2B Apt > 2B Apt
Belle Jack	NA 39	M F	NA 100	NA BA	married	1	study room, living room//living room in husband's parents' house study room, living room//living room in husband's parents' house	rent	3B Apt

Table 1. *Cont.*

Name	Age	Gender	Annual Income (10,000 NTD)	Education	Relationship	Children	Working Space at Home	Residence	Layout
Winter *	40	F	40	BA	married	1	the whole household study room/bathroom	owned	studio
Yvonne *	38	F	70–80	MA	married	1	living room (parents' house)//main bedroom (in which the kids sleep) study room (parents' house)//balcony	owned	3B Apt
Clair *	30	F	60	MA	married	2	her brother's room her room	owned/with wife's parents	
Ken Mia	32 32	M F	70–100 65–70	BA MA	married	1	bedroom bedroom> guest room (COVID)	owned/with husband's parents and younger sister	4B Apt
Emma William	50 65	F M	100 70–80	BA MA	married	1	study room study room	owned	3B Apt
Callie Leo	42	F M	80–100 150	MA MA	married	1	dining room, dining table > her brother's room dining room, dining table, wardrobe > her room	owned	2B Apt
Jolin *	47	F	40	BA	married	3	bedroom, balcony, public staircase, community public space living room	owned by husband's mother	3B Apt
Amber *	57	F	200	PhD	married	2	bedroom, study room, her office (independent) bedroom, study room	dorm from wife's job	3B Apt
Jennifer *	55	F	150	BA	married	1	living room, bedroom in bed bedroom on the desk	owned by husband's mother/ with husband's mother	3B Apt

Note: table shows working space at home. * Signifies people not being interviewed. The space they worked at home was getting from their partner's interview. >Signifies the change before and after they move; // Signifies that two spaces were both used.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted during the summer of 2022 when the omicron variants of COVID-19 were sweeping Taiwan. The interviews were around one hour in length. 16 of them were conducted through online meeting software with the camera off; others were conducted in person, at interviewees' homes or offices. All were audibly and digitally recorded. We would talk by phone instead of having a video meeting per interviewee preference. This was usually what they did during the work meetings: camera off with only voices.

Conducting interviews through phone simulated workers' remote work scenario not only in form but also in their motivations for working remotely during the pandemic. Interviewees with little children especially preferred to conduct the interview remotely due to concerns that having contact with others might bring risks to their kids who were not old enough to be vaccinated. These precautionary actions and the concerns about COVID-19 to many of them were their reasons to work from home at the time. I found later in the interviews that parents opted to work remotely when they had the choice for the same reason.

This study employed a flexible coding approach (Deterding and Waters 2021) to analyze field notes and interview transcripts using the Atlas.ti coding software. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, recorded, and transcribed by the author. The analysis was performed from an abductive analytical perspective (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). First, the data were coded for overarching topics guided by important themes from the literature and the interview questions. Second, analytic codes were applied to relevant subsections of the indexed data, and the codebook was refined to identify patterns and meaning in coded data. Consistent with the methodological principles of abductive analysis, analytic memos were generated throughout the research process, and compared with the original data to refine the findings and theoretical contribution.

3. Results

3.1. Ethnographic Description of Teleworking Couples in Taipei

As the busiest metropolitan area in Taiwan, the average living space is limited like in other big metropolises around the world. The average living area in Taipei was 409 square feet in 2020 and the apartment space is usually cramped in Taipei. A home office is not a usual setup in apartments in Taipei. In my sample of generally educated and affluent couples who had the privilege of working remotely, only 8 out of 19 households had a study room at home. Some of the study rooms, like the literature has pointed out, were mainly used by men. For example, Hazel and George are a cohabiting couple who split a three-bedroom apartment with one roommate. They had two rooms and they used one as a bedroom and another one as a computer room. The computer room was mainly used by George because "he spent a lot of time playing video games" (Hazel). Therefore, when the pandemic happened and they both started working from home, Hazel used her table in their bedroom with the bed in the background.

While gender inequality manifests in the form of a study room/home office for some interviewees, I found it challenging to establish a pattern of gender disparity in physical space because only a few households have a dedicated study room. Even when such spaces exist, they are often shared by the entire family and serve multiple functions. For multiple families in my sample, their only spare room doubles as both a study and a guest room. Oftentimes, there is no appropriate working environment at home due to both limited living space and infrequent remote work arrangements apart from the conditions of the pandemic in Taiwan. Consequently, I delved into the physical space as well as the subjective experience of space used to examine the gender dynamics of space at home, further elaborated upon in the next section.

Another family arrangement that appeared frequently for my interviewees is that grandparents played a vital role in childcare. This echoes what the literature has pointed out: many married couples still live with or live close to their parents after they get married

(Biddlecom et al. 2002; Frankenberg et al. 2002; Hermalin and Yang 2004). Different from the Western context, elderly people in Asian countries that follow the Confucius tradition of filial piety do not typically prefer living alone to living with their adult children (Pong and Chen 2010).

This has three implications for the spatial experiences of couples working remotely. First of all, the presence of other family members can influence the gender norms within the household. With the shifting gender values in Taiwan over time, the older generation may uphold more conservative gender values, impacting the gender dynamics at home. Secondly, having grandparents at home complicates the task of arranging additional workspace for couples due to more people sharing the space than nuclear families.

Thirdly, this type of living arrangement facilitates the grandparents' ability to care for young grandchildren while their daughters or daughters-in-law are at work (Yu 2009). This is attributed to the lack of public support for childcare in Taiwan (Chiu and Wei 2011). With the high female labor participation rates, relatives—primarily grandmothers—and nannies constitute major sources of childcare assistance for Taiwan's dual-earner families. According to Wang (2014), in 2010, grandparents were the temporary primary caregivers for approximately 33% of Taiwanese children under the age of three. The multigenerational support for childcare shows in my sample. Among ten couples with children in my sample, six relied on their parents to watch their children while they worked from home during the pandemic. Two couples even relocated or commuted to their parent's house to work remotely for childcare purposes. On the one hand, parental assistance alleviated the burden for remote-working couples; on the other hand, their interactions with remote-working couples reinforced the notion of mothers as primary caregivers, as will be elaborated on in later sections.

3.2. A Preferable Space

I was surprised to find that there was not a consistent pattern of space allocation between men and women in my sample. Contrary to previous studies (Waismel-Manor et al. 2021), where men typically worked in independent rooms while their wives worked in open spaces, only 3 couples out of the 19 couples in my sample followed this pattern. Instead, most of my respondents either shared the same space with their partner or had their own room to work in. In three cases, the wife received the independent room to work in while the husband worked in the living room. This inconsistency between my findings and the literature might be related either to the relative lack of dedicated workspace at home in most Taipei apartments or to the fact that remote work had not been available to many interviewees before the pandemic (See Table 1). Although the distribution of physical space among my sample did not follow expected gender patterns, gender norms continued to shape how working parents in these spaces were treated.

Upon further exploration of their experiences of remote work and preferences of space, I discovered greater nuances in how space and the experience of that space are perceived in relation to gender. Sheer size or the independence of the space were not the only characteristics that distinguish space. I found a gendered pattern of men tending to work in spaces that had a lesser impact of disruption and were more conducive to work. I named them "the preferable space" to capture the relative, subjective, and dynamic aspects of the space. This subjective aspect of space challenges what we think of as "equal" in terms of space allocation. Even when the physical space men worked in seemed less ideal physically, the space where men worked was preferable in many aspects. To be specific, preferable space can be defined through physical conditions and whether it is interruptible.

One important aspect is that the preferable space has more conducive physical settings, just as the case of Cathy and Jimmy shows. Cathy and Jimmy, a cohabitating couple, lived together in a 250-square-foot studio before moving to a one-bedroom apartment. In the studio, where space was limited to a desk and a bed, Jimmy got the desk while Cathy worked from the bed. However, using a small bed stray as a working surface in bed caused

Cathy long-term backache and insomnia at the time. Despite recognizing the negative physical impact, they did not switch working spots. When asked about it, Cathy explained

> "We didn't consider switching spots because he has long legs. He couldn't stay in bed like I did because I was tiny. I could work on the bed using a bed tray, but he couldn't do it. We tried, but he flipped the tray when he stretched his legs. I was like, 'Poor him, let's not do this to him.'" (Cathy)

Between the desk and the bed, the desk was the preferable space due to the negative impact on the body while working from the bed. Although Cathy initially attributed the arrangement to her inability to sit upright like an office worker and her tendency to fidget, she no longer worked from the bed after moving to the one-bedroom apartment. This choice demonstrates her true preference for a working space. Cathy compromised by working in bed to accommodate Jimmy's comfort:

> "At that time, I felt that moving was the only solution because that space couldn't be used in other ways. No matter what, it would be painful to one person. (sigh) And because normally, as I mentioned earlier, I usually have a poor sitting posture. Even when I worked in the office, I often had backaches. So I thought that it is what it is. I had the backache already. I just felt that we needed to at least keep one person healthy. That's why we didn't swap sites at the time and decided to move in the future". (Cathy)

While space was a significant factor affecting Cathy's working experiences and her life at the time, Jimmy did not refer to space as a problem of working from home. When I asked how they decided who got to use the desk and who worked in the bed, Jimmy just simply replied, "Cathy just let me use the desk".

Cathy and Jimmy ended up moving to a one-bedroom apartment when the lease expired. They alternated between using a formal workspace in the bedroom and a sofa with a height-adjustable desk every two weeks to avoid the potential backache caused by prolonged sitting on the sofa. Cathy's insomnia immediately recovered when she no longer worked in bed. Nevertheless, Jimmy would have the desk after he set up the extended monitor in the bedroom. In the end, Cathy, who had already suffered from backache from the former working environment, would continue to work on the couch in the living room, a less preferable space compared to the desk in the bedroom.

While Cathy and Jimmy represented an extreme example of limited space at home, they were not an exception for men getting a preferable space at home. This pattern of men obtaining a preferable space to work at home is prevalent in my sample. While one might posit that the preferable space for men was a manifestation of cultural emphasis on men's jobs, Stacy and Cheng's case demonstrates that the space allocation was not contingent upon job contents, income, or house ownership.

Stacy and Cheng were a newlywed couple who lived in their three-bedroom condo bought by Stacy's parents in Taipei. Unlike most young couples in Taipei, Stacy and Cheng had a relatively spacious home setup to work. They had a home office which had been used as Cheng's office before the pandemic. Cheng, employed as a salesperson for games, did not have an office place at his company. During the pandemic, Cheng's work was mostly halted because he could not promote the games outside; thus, he lost his regular income. In contrast, Stacy, a product manager, transitioned to work from home. However, despite her more official work in terms of income and contents, Stacy worked on the sofa because she "doesn't like to sit in front of the desk". Meanwhile, Cheng continued using the home office to trade stocks and cryptocurrencies. This resonates with Aliya Rao's findings (2020) on the gender dynamics within married couples dealing with unemployment. She found that unemployed men often occupy an official space at home dedicated to job searching. This dedicated space for men buffers the tension of incompatibility of the cultural scripts of a masculine breadwinner and feminine homemaker. However, while families set up their homes to facilitate men's job searches, little space is left for women. Traditionally gendered conceptualizations of work—as a requirement for

men but optional for women—are exemplified in the use of space, even in marriages that have not adhered to gender-traditional roles. Women received the less preferable spaces at home despite the work content. In this case, Stacy worked in a less preferable space despite her parents having bought the apartment for them. While the specific reasons behind these decisions may be personal and based on individual preferences, when considered collectively, they contributed to a pattern that creates less favorable conditions for women working from home.

These less favorable conditions for space had an impact on women's experiences working from home and their preferences regarding remote work or working in the office. They created an invisible barrier hindering women's ability to fully benefit from flexible working policies, even when such benefits were offered fairly by companies. How the space affected women's preference for working from home is shown in the case of Amelia and Bond.

Amelia and Bond were a newlywed couple living with Bond's parents in a four-floor house. Amelia worked in the computer room, which was an independent room, and her husband, Bond, worked in the living room. Although an independent room is often assumed to be the better space for work, it was not in this case because there was no air conditioner in the room and Bond's father often went into the computer room to use the printer. In fact, before Bond began working from home, Amelia moved around the house to find a suitable workplace: "I didn't have a fixed office space. I would move around, sometimes staying in the living room on the first floor, sometimes using the desk on the second floor, and sometimes staying in the computer room". Bond claimed the desk on the second floor after he worked from home later than Amelia did, while Amelia stayed in the small, hot room. When asked about her preference for working from home or in the office, Amelia answered that she preferred to work in the office because it is cooler in the office with the air conditioner.

Regardless of factors such as house ownership, job contents, income, or space availability, I identified a gendered pattern of space allocation, one where men tended to have a preferable space to work at home compared to their partners. A preferable workspace is one that offers favorable conditions for work, such as a desk that allows for a comfortable setting or an environment with appropriate temperature control. The scenario with both couples working from home in this study occurred during the pandemic, and most of my interviewees were sent home suddenly and were expecting to go back to the office at any time. Amidst this chaotic and temporary situation, a gendered pattern emerged where women frequently made accommodations for their partners and compromised their own needs and preferences. This pattern of women making accommodations and thus ending up with the less preferable space to work at home was particularly pronounced among couples with children. In the next section, I will delve into the critical factor shaping a preferable working space—whether a worker can concentrate on their tasks without interruptions. I will demonstrate how the presence of children reinforced traditional gender roles associated with motherhood and fatherhood. The expectation of gender roles made the space in which women stayed vulnerable to interpolation regardless of the objective physical conditions of the space. Eventually, men had a preferable space to work at home.

3.3. An Interruptible Working Environment

What made a space a preferable space to work at home? Besides the physical settings, a space where a worker could focus on work and remain undisturbed would be considered a preferable space. The literature from Western contexts demonstrates that an independent space would be preferable for working at home due to its ability to physically separate work and family (Waismel-Manor et al. 2021). Nevertheless, women in my sample found it challenging to find an undisturbed physical workspace regardless of whether they had an independent space or not.

The different social expectations of gender, instead of walls and doors, determined whether the space was able to remain undisturbed. Besides the role of worker, other social

roles of women such as mother, wife, or daughter, frequently infiltrated the physical space and caused interruptions. Conversely, men experienced fewer disruptions from family members or household responsibilities while working from home.

Jolin is a social worker with three children. She lived with her husband, three children, and her mother-in-law in a three-bedroom condo in Taipei. This was not a spacious condo for a five-person household; however, when the pandemic hit, she was able to work in the bedroom while her husband worked in the living room because the desk in the bedroom had always been used by her. Although Jolin got to work in an independent working space with a door, she brought her work to the balcony, the public stairs of their condo building, or the public patio during the sultry summer in Taipei because her children liked to roll on the bed where they all slept together. In particular, her youngest child, who was in preschool, had much energy and wanted Jolin to play with him. He barged into the room or knocked on Jolin's door when she worked in the room. The kids, who wanted attention, made Jolin's room with walls and doors interruptible.

On the other hand, Jolin's husband's presence in the living room transformed the physically open space into a secluded workspace. Her husband worked undisturbed in the open living room while Jolin worked on the adjacent balcony, keeping an eye on their son as he rode his bike. Despite having two other adults at home, the children sought only their mother's attention. They hesitated to approach their father because he lacked patience and would express irritation when he got interrupted at work. In an effort to encourage the children to seek their father's assistance more often, Jolin developed a strategy. She created an Excel spreadsheet and tracked the number of times the kids called out for "mom". Once the count reached a specific threshold, such as thirty times a day, the kids were no longer allowed to call for mom and had to turn to their father instead.

Jolin's husband took it for granted that she would be solely responsible for caring for their three children, with the eldest being eleven years old. He assumed that childcare was primarily the mother's role, while his duty was to work and assist their son with technical aspects of remote schooling. He did not need to express it explicitly to stir the belief of gender equality which Jolin cares about a lot; his impatience when interrupted conveyed the message, causing the children to instinctively avoid bothering him.

Jolin's case illustrates that having an independent physical space did not guarantee an independent and uninterrupted working environment, particularly for mothers. Gender equality in Taiwan has improved greatly in regard to family laws, Employment Laws, and the political arena, including high levels of female representation and a female president (Tompkins 2011). According to a national survey, people generally believe in gender equality where men and women are equally competent at work and should share equal responsibilities for housework (Executive Yuan 2023). Jolin explicitly claimed that sharing housework equally was important to her and she has made an agreement with her husband about it. However, in practice, at home, these gender ideologies were difficult to fulfill. The multiple social roles women often carried, such as being wives, daughters, and mothers, superseded their physical space and caused interruption of their work when they were working from home. On the contrary, when men were working, they only worked. They experienced fewer disruptions from other family members or house chores while working from home. Consequently, men were perceived primarily as workers and were able to enjoy a relatively independent work environment, even when they did not have a physically separate space for working from home.

Women's susceptibility to interruptions from other family members, as they assumed traditional social roles assigned to women, is illustrated in Emma's experience of working from home. Emma and her husband lived with Emma's parents and their 15-month-old son and four-year-old son in a five-story house combined with two duplexes. Emma and her husband each worked from a separate room. When they worked, Emma's father supervised the four-year-old son with his online courses and Emma's mother took care of the 15-month-old baby. When they set up their workspaces at home, Emma was assigned to the side of the duplex where her four-year-old son was located. This was because he was

old enough to cry for his mother, causing occasional disruptions. Emma often had to pause her work to reprimand or call to him upstairs, requesting her son to be quiet.

Meanwhile, her husband, a designer whose job was less directly impacted by sounds or temporary absences, worked in the other duplex where Emma's mother and their baby son stayed. Unlike Emma, who was consistently interrupted and expected to step in whenever their child became unruly, her husband faced minimal interruptions from the baby. It was not because the baby was easier to care for, but rather because Emma's mother would not disturb him. Her mother would cross the duplex to seek help from Emma. Although Emma worked in an independent room and had parents helping with the kids, she still expressed difficulty around working from home:

> "My parents called me from time to time when I worked, but I was working. I couldn't really leave. . .they often came to me because I was at home, so I felt like I didn't really have a boundary between work and life. . .I had to remind them frequently that I was working. I needed to be very clear at the beginning. I usually just closed and locked the door to prevent them from coming in suddenly". (Emma)

Despite Emma's work requiring frequent communication, her parents called her for assistance with the kids, but not her husband. Consequently, she had to lock the door to minimize interruptions. While working from home, Emma had to juggle the roles of a mother, daughter, and worker, while her husband was primarily viewed as a worker. The rest of the family left her husband undisturbed, whereas they intruded on Emma's time and space, prompting her to lock the door to safeguard her work time when necessary. This case shows how gender roles are culturally and socially constructed through interactions (Cunningham 2001). Scholars have found that the gender gap in domestic labor is larger for couples living with other family members than for couples who live by themselves (Lu and Yi 2005).

Among the various social roles assigned to women, motherhood holds a significant influence in perpetuating gender scripts, which shape the gendered pattern of space. While people often attribute it to children's natural tendencies, the cases of Jolin and Emma reveal that it is the societal value of the mother as the primary caregiver that facilitates easy access for children to go for their mothers when in need. Jolin's husband displayed grumpiness when the children approached him, and Emma was situated in a room close to her son to cater to his requests whenever needed. Through these arrangements, children were encouraged or accustomed to seeking their mother's attention instead of their father's, even when both parents were present at home.

The belief that the mother is the primary caregiver then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that appears difficult to break, as shown in Mia and Ken's story. Mia, a mother of a two-year-old girl, Lily, and a visual designer, initially worked in the living room with her husband Ken when the pandemic struck. She later moved to the guest room by herself which later became a home office for her after being quarantined there due to contracting COVID-19. Like many mothers who worked from home, having an independent room did not prevent Mia from being interrupted by her daughter, which was reflected in the interview. Just a few minutes into the interview, Lily entered the room and asked for Mia. Mia tried to negotiate with Lily, suggesting she play with Ken for a bit, but Mia relented. Mia ended up surrendering to Lily throughout the interview.

After Lily entered the room, the sense of chaos seemed almost tangible through the phone. Mia was navigating a dual conversation: one minute she was sharing her experience with me, and the next minute she was using another voice to talk with Lily. Mia eventually convinced Lily to go to the park with Ken, and her voice faded from the phone momentarily. However, it was not long before Lily returned home, seeking Mia's presence once again. Again, Mia had to alternate between sharing her experience with me and engaging with Lily. In order to talk without disruption in the interview, Mia again lured Lily to play the piano with Ken. During the one-hour interview, Mia continued to be interrupted, even with Ken and her parents-in-law present at home. Although Ken was home and aware

that Mia was in an interview and needed space, he did little. Lily only longed for her mother's attention.

Why did the kids only ask for their mothers? Ken and Mia attributed it to Lily's personality that she was just clingy to her mother. With the naturalization of the behavior, Ken felt like there was nothing he could do to shoulder the main responsibility of taking care of Lily and thus improve Mia's working situation at home. By naturalizing social settings with biological factors or individual preferences, the gendered division of labor is sustained and reproduced (Hawkesworth 2013; Kane and Schippers 1996; Lorber 1993).

However, the social construction of this gendered dynamic was shown in Mia's daily routine when Lily was two years old: A typical weekday for Mia started at six or seven in the morning as she prepared milk for Lily. Mia started to work at eight, an hour earlier than her firm's usual start time of nine, in order to finish work by five p.m. and take care of Lily. To attend the morning team meeting, Mia put Lily to sleep by feeding her and stayed in the bed with her while working on her laptop because Lily slept better with Mia being around. Mia stayed in bed until ten, until Lily woke up upon hearing the sound of the meeting and sat beside Mia while reading or playing with toys. Lily's attention span would typically last no longer than three or four minutes, so Mia continuously distracted her with different toys to continue to be attending the meeting. After the meeting, Mia would proceed to prepare lunch for both Lily and herself around eleven. She then had lunch with Lily, cleaned up, and went back to work when the lunch break ended at two p.m. Throughout the entire morning when Mia woke up early to work and watch Lily, and fed Lily two meals by herself, the other family members including Ken were sleeping. It was not until in the afternoon when Mia's mother-in-law took over to watch Lily that Mia could focus on her work. Later, Mia would get off work around five p.m. when Lily knocked on her door and took over the primary responsibility of being with Lily again. Ken, the father, was never the primary caregiver during the whole day.

It is not difficult to imagine why Lily relied on Mia the most, as Mia was attentive to her most of the time. Mia had been constantly available to her when she took six months of parental leave after Lily was born. After Mia returned to work in the office, Lily stayed at home with her grandparents. Although Mia and Ken thought that Lily's attachment to her mother was simply a result of her personality and typical child behavior, they also acknowledged that Lily was only craving for Mia when she knew that Mia's home. When Mia was not at home, Lily was content and at ease with Ken's mother.

Several gendered logics intertwined and intensified with each other, creating an inescapable trap for working mothers. After working from home with Lily for a few months during the pandemic, Mia took the parental leave again because she was exhausted by the dual burdens of work and childcare. Nevertheless, the parental leave made it more difficult for Mia to return to work because Lily became accustomed to having her constant presence. Ever since Lily turned three years old, she no longer slept much during the day and required constant attention and time with playmates. As a result, Mia found it increasingly challenging to work from home. To resolve this, Mia had to take on the risk of contracting COVID and go to a café to work if she needed to focus. Mia had the independent space at home, unlike Ken who worked in their bedroom; however, she was the one who left home and kept changing working sites because of her child.

Women's work was judged to be more interruptible when they worked from home with their partners. The gender expectations associated with being a mother, daughter, and wife often overshadowed women's role as workers, frequently pulling them away from their work when they were at home. The physical barriers of walls and doors did not adequately safeguard women's time and personal space within the home. Conversely, men's work was prioritized when they worked from home regardless of the physical space. They experienced fewer interruptions even in open spaces. This stark contrast in the experience of space underscores the significant disparity between men and women, especially mothers, in remote work, revealing a tale of two realities of remote work.

3.4. A Tale of Two Realities

Remote work has been touted as a practice to save commuting time, improve worker productivity, and enhance work–family balance. Overall, interviewees expressed their preference for remote work or hybrid work after the pandemic. Jimmy and Stacy, the young couple we met in the former section, both preferred to work remotely despite the difficulties they had faced from the limited home space:

> "I prefer to work from home because I don't have to commute and I also don't need to spend time grooming. Additionally, in terms of life planning, because housing prices in Taipei are too high, if we were to move to other counties or cities, remote work would also provide us with some flexibiity". (Jimmy)

Stacy also preferred to work remotely, but for different reasons:

> "I love to work remotely because I can do so much at home. I feel like I utilize my time more efficiently. . .Sometimes when I finish work early, I clean the house or do the groceries. I think it is great! If I were in the office, I would be stuck there until six before I could leave". (Stacy)

It was surprising to hear this from Stacy, especially considering her previous struggles with back pain and insomnia due to remote work. Apparently, in an ideal scenario where everyone has a suitable place to work from home, remote work appealed to some respondents. Amber's perspective on remote work also highlights the complexity of its reality:

> "I could work from home, given the age of my children. If my children were younger, I wouldn't want to work from home. I would want to come to the office because I need some privacy. I prefer to work from home because there is not much of interruption for me now. I think for women, the age of their children and whether they have a child is the key.
>
> For me, the biggest motivation for working from home is [no need to] commute. I think that saves me a lot of time and hustle, especially for the energy. I spend too much time on public transportation doing nothing. I could only scroll on my phone. I think I waste a lot of time commuting, so commuting is always my big concern. I think that is a real waste". (Amber)

When discussing the reality of remote work, numerous factors come into play. The experience of remote work could vary depending on the circumstances. Through interviews, I observed a stark cleavage in the experiences of remote work between individuals who meet these conditions and those who do not. I coin this distinction as "the two realities of remote work". This paper uses the two realities to contrast the cleavage between what we hope for remote work, and the reality of remote work. The reality of remote work is plural and complicated, intertwined by various social positions. The first reality of the tale is what we hope for remote work—saving commuting time and allowing workers to decide the best work scenario for them. Anna, a technical writer who started her current job during the pandemic, analyzed the benefits of working remotely:

> "I preferred to work remotely because I saved a lot of time commuting. . . In my current job, I don't really feel that online discussions for collaboration are less efficient compared to face-to-face interactions. So, once again, I don't see a real necessity for in-person meetings. Moreover, when it comes to remote work, I personally feel less likely to be disrupted. As we communicate through asynchronous messages, I have the opportunity to think clearly about what I want to discuss, and the purpose of my message, and I can convey the information clearly once". (Anna)

However, Anna was an exception in my sample, as she did not get a less preferable space to work from home compared to her partner. Anna was living with four other roommates, including her boyfriend Blue, who shared a room with her in a four-bedroom apartment. Anna and Blue skillfully set up their desks, each facing one of the walls in their bedroom, ensuring that neither would appear in the other's background. Because

they just moved from a smaller studio to this new apartment, the limited space at this home was not a problem for Anna and Blue. They furnished and arranged the space according to their needs, each having a desk in the room. When either of them needed to attend a meeting, the other would go to the living room. They were a cohabitating couple, but they were also roommates with each other and three other people, with whom they shared the space and the house chores. At this stage of their relationship, the gendered expectations of husband–wife or mother–father roles had not yet been imposed on them. Anna was able to discuss and allocate the space with her boyfriend before they moved into the new apartment and had a satisfactory space to work. She was also able to arrange the house chores equally with her boyfriend and other roommates so that she was not buried with house chores. Sharing the apartment with other friends, Anna and Blue were like independent individuals rather than any gender roles.

In other cases, gender was a salient influence on whether an individual could meet workable conditions at home. The social expectations of gender shaped men's and women's experience of the physical space. The impact of gendered social roles was particularly pronounced in the contrasting experiences of working from home during the pandemic for dual-income parents. Fathers, interestingly, similar to couples without children, lived the bright and sanguine reality of remote work. Leo, a father of a two-year-old boy, shared his joy in recalling his experience of working from home with his family:

> "When our child was between one to two years old, both my wife and I were at home. My wife took parental leave when he turned one. The period from one to two years old is crucial for rapid growth and significant changes in children. Usually, parents choose to send their children to a babysitter or daycare during this period because both parents can't take parental leave together. Then they miss out on being involved in their child's growth. So, being able to be home with my son brought me a great sense of happiness, personally. I got to witness him constantly growing, which brought me a lot of joy". (Leo)

Ken, a father of a two-year-old daughter, also pointed out the differences before and after he started to work from home:

> "Before I had children, I often worked overtime, and since I went to the office, I would return home late. . . Usually, when I left in the morning, my daughter was either just waking up or still asleep, and by the time I returned, she was already about to sleep. That was the situation before. Now that when I stay at home, even though my working hours are the same, my daughter gets to see me more often and I can interact with her". (Ken)

Previously, Ken's long working hours with commuting time made it difficult for him to spend time with his daughter during the weekdays. Now, he is able to save time from commuting. The additional time fathers spent at home allowed them to align with the most common feature of the "new" fatherhood: presence (Cannito and Scavarda 2020; Dermott and Millar 2015). Unlike mothers, fathers have more flexibility in their relationship with their children, making it easier for them to comply with the model of 'good fatherhood' with minimum adjustments to their work time (Miller 2011). Working from home facilitated the work–family balance as suggested by the literature, but only for men (Cannito and Scavarda 2020). Their spouses, on the other hand, illustrated a very different reality of remote work.

While the interview with Leo was filled with the happiness of becoming a father, frustration and anxiety brimmed over the phone during the interview with Leo's spouse, Callie. Callie sighed as she recalled her experience of working from home:

> "I felt like there wasn't any advantage [of working from home]. The only advantage was that I wouldn't catch COVID at home; however, the disadvantage was that I couldn't do anything well. I had to take care of the kid and work, and it's not really possible to do both together". (Callie)

Instead of achieving a sense of work–family balance through remote work, Callie found herself feeling the need to take parental leave after experiencing the challenges of working from home with her son, Henry. Henry constantly asked for her. This difficulty was reflected in the interview. Henry's sounds were present in the background throughout Callie's conversation. Leo attempted to take Henry out of the room once then relented. In order to distract Henry from Callie, Leo stayed in the room during the interview for a while. Henry, Leo, and Callie's mother's voices were audible in the background intermittently, urging Callie to go back to Henry. As challenging as it was for Callie to conduct a one hour interview, one must consider the additional challenges faced by Callie to work even when she had an independent space at home. Consequently, Callie found it challenging to strike a balance between work and family working from home. In contrast, Leo's interview was smooth and free from disruptions, mirroring his contentment and satisfaction with working from home.

Just as Callie's parental leave ended, the Omicron variant surged in Taiwan, resulting in the postponement of Henry's preschool enrollment. In order to continue working from home, Callie and Leo decided to commute to her parents' place with Henry every day, relying on her parents to take care of Henry while they attended to their remote work responsibilities. Remote work is supposed to save commute time, but Callie and Henry ended up commuting in order to work remotely. Although that was a temporary solution for Callie's conundrum, the multiple interruptions from Henry and other family members during the interview showed the tension of an irreconcilable conflict between work and family for Callie, and only for Callie.

Callie was not the only woman who put her career on hold to care for their children. Mia, Ken's spouse, negotiated with her supervisor to take parental leave after working from home with Lily for four months.

> "I told my supervisor that I was not content with what I produced at work after I worked from home. I felt too tired to work and take care of my daughter at the same time. My supervisor was like, 'I think your work was fine. . .or, let me make an arrangement for you to come in two days or three days a week, and work remotely on the other days", but I didn't want to. I wanted a time for me to just rest.'" (Mia)

These women are professional white-collar workers who are valued in their firms and the job market. Mia's supervisor was hesitant about her taking parental leave and even suggested a flexible work times and space arrangements to accommodate her. However, working from home did not represent a solution without her role as a worker being protected at home because women are expected to be a mother, not a worker at home. Although remote work is supposed to suit a flexible working policy that allows workers to balance work and life, women end up being caught up with their multiple roles, leading them to leave the labor market.

The reason why these fathers could enjoy working from home with their children was because their wives were the primary caregivers who took the children away from them when they needed to focus on work. Although fathers were at home and spent more time with their children, the time they spent was separate from their work responsibilities. Consequently, while fathers cherished the precious opportunity to witness their children's once-and-only growth, mothers struggled to juggle multiple responsibilities when working from home.

As a result of having to take on multiple roles when working from home, women, especially mothers, expressed frustration and anxiety due to the constant interruptions by their children when they talked about their experience of working from home. "It was basically impossible for me to work from home when kids were also at home", Jolin sighed. Jolin, the social worker who already attempted through whatever means she could to provide stimulating and engaging activities for her children while working, noticed her decreasing working quality and was worried that she might get fired if the situation did not change. Her only hope lay in the reopening of the school.

Motherhood penalty, which refers to the fact that women are getting lower wages for being mothers (Anderson et al. 2003; Correll et al. 2007; Glass 2004; Yu and Kuo 2017), is crucial to gender inequality in the workplace because men are not penalized for being fathers. While the literature mostly focuses on wage, my findings show that mothers with young children, who are aimed to benefit from the remote work policy, were especially ineligible for these benefits.

This study shows that gender norms and beliefs remain rigid regardless of the material changes, such as a remote working policy. In the end, women, especially mothers with young children, live a separate reality from the tale of remote work. Gender inequality was reproduced through the practice that was supposed to bring changes.

4. Discussion

The literature that concerns remote work policy-reinforced gender inequalities is predominantly based on Western contexts (Chung et al. 2022; Dunatchik et al. 2021; Glass 2004; Glass and Noonan 2016). My findings add to the concern by contending that men working from home are generally better than women in shielding themselves from the intrusion of unpaid care work through the spatial arrangements at home. When working from home, women tended to have less preferable space to accommodate their family's needs and to be interrupted during work. Men, in contrast, derived a relatively stable, undisturbed, and preferable working environment at home. The experiences of household space were largely shaped by the traditional gender role expectations, thus perpetuating gender inequality at work when work was conducted at home. This finding indicates that the allocation of space, just like the division of domestic work, is a product not only of rational decision-making such as time availability or relative resources, but also of gendered expectations about household responsibilities (Bianchi et al. 2000; Fauser 2019; Kalleberg and Rosenfeld 1990).

Remote work turns out to become a tale of two realities: The first reality is lived by those fortunate enough to have conducive home environments for work, characterized by minimal interruptions. For instance, individuals without children can leverage the autonomy provided by remote work to enhance productivity and achieve a better work–life balance. Remote work also improves men's work–family balance by enabling them to spend more time with their families without compromising their work commitments. The second reality, however, paints a stark contrast for those unable to meet these conditions. Women, especially mothers with young children, struggle to work when they are home. For them, remote work exacerbates the challenges of achieving work–family balance, particularly during the pandemic when young children were at home.

This second reality highlights a long line of feminist arguments suggesting childbearing and childcare as pivotal factors contributing to gender inequality in contemporary industrialized societies where most mothers are employed (Anderson et al. 2002, 2003; Avellar and Smock 2003; Budig and Hodges 2010; Correll et al. 2007; England et al. 2016; Gough and Noonan 2013; Ishizuka 2021; Kahn et al. 2014; Yu and Kuo 2017). While remote work has been regarded as a policy favoring workers' productivity and autonomy, the second reality of remote work unveils an alternative manifestation of the motherhood penalty that mothers are hindered from harnessing the benefits of remote work and instead are entrenched in its difficulties, as working from home with children becomes a formidable task.

The gendered spatial pattern shows that gendered beliefs and behaviors often extend beyond physical confines. By highlighting how gendered norms and behaviors were actively maintained by spouses at a time when they could be dismantled, this study demonstrates the persistence of gendered beliefs that exceed physical settings and reproduce gender inequality at work in spite of the flexible working policy implanted.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Conclusions

There existed a gendered pattern of space use that favored men and disadvantaged women that superseded physical space settings. Women used a less preferable space at home to work. Even when women managed to secure a separate room for work, they remained on call, ready to attend to their children's needs at any moment. In the sample, most couples with pre-school-aged children relied on their parents' help during the working hours. However, even with grandparents taking care of the children, many mothers were still interrupted during work. In fact, other family members, including adults and little children, mainly sought assistance from women but kept house chores, crying babies, and active toddlers from men so that they could work at home, perpetuating traditional gender beliefs that regard men as breadwinners and women as primary housekeepers and caregivers. Therefore, the spaces where men worked, whether an independent study room, an open dining room, or a living room, were effectively transformed into transparent home offices, shielding men from household disruptions and allowing them to work without interruptions. This space use demonstrates a tale of two realities of remote work that benefited men in general but hindered women's, especially mothers', careers in practice.

5.2. Limitations

This study does possess certain limitations. First of all, this study examines the experiences of heterosexual couples in Taipei who worked from home together to explore the interrelationship between gender and space. It is noteworthy that Taiwan was never under strict lockdown, and remote work practices were often influenced by the government's alert level announcements or required quarantines due to COVID. Many interviewees only worked from home with their partner intermittently for a few months. The temporary and transient situations of the pandemic may have resulted in a completely different spatial setting compared to long-term and stable work-from-home arrangements. Nevertheless, this study shows that the gendered logic and the following gender inequality emerged even after a short exposure to working from home.

Another important factor that underscored the gender dynamics in this study was that many of the interviewees' children were at home. Although some children were at home due to the pandemic, many of them were at home because they were not old enough to attend preschool. Many young children were watched at home before the pandemic. In Taiwan, parents rely on their kin network or a private nanny for childcare instead of institutional care (Yu 2009, p. 103). For school-aged children, although the interruptions from children being at home were particularly salient during the pandemic, remote-working mothers might still encounter work interruptions if the traditional gender norms persist. Children may be ill and need to stay home, they may be sent home from school for various reasons, or a nanny may take leave. Despite grandparents offering significant assistance with childcare in Taiwan, they too might fall sick. If working mothers, and especially remote-working mothers, are automatically considered the primary caregivers whenever children require care, they are likely to continue experiencing work interruptions when these inevitable issues emerge, even when they have relatively independent school-age children. That is to say, although the pandemic exacerbated the tension for mothers working from home, the story is expected to hold in the "normal" scenario.

Understanding the experiences of working from home with children unveiled the gender logic of who is considered the caregiver when it is needed. However, whether remote work would foster women's work–family balance when their children are not home still needs to be studied. These arguments need to be carefully examined, considering the extreme circumstances of closed childcare and schools during the pandemic. In addition to childcare, elderly care also becomes an important concern for the trend of population aging in many industrial countries. Given that women spend two to ten times more time on unpaid care work than men, the care responsibility of elderly family members might

also affect women's experience when they work from home with or without the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last but not least, this paper relied on a relatively small sample to obtain data in depth. The observations are subject to verification with larger and more random samples. However, the finding would not have emerged had this qualitative study not been conducted first. Future research that draws on a larger sample to examine the space allocation between genders to generalize the argument to a broader population is needed.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are not available due to privacy restrictions from IRB.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Note

[1] In this paper, Taipei refers to the Taipei–Keelung metropolitan area, which is known as "Greater Taipei". It includes Taipei City and the nearby cities of New Taipei City and Keelung City. Like most metropolitan areas, people both commute and move within the metropolitan and cross the municipal boundary of the city on a daily basis. Therefore, sampling from people who live in the Taipei–Keelung metropolitan area will capture the experience of people in Taipei. All of the interviewees work and live within the Taipei–Keelung metropolitan area.

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The Shifting Stress of Working Parents: An Examination of Dual Pandemic Disruptions—Remote Work and Remote Schooling

Wen Fan [1,*] and Phyllis Moen [2]

[1] Department of Sociology, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA
[2] Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA; phylmoen@umn.edu
* Correspondence: wen.fan@bc.edu

Abstract: Working remotely at least some of the time has long been seen as promoting a better integration of work and care obligations, even though prepandemic research is mixed as to the extent to which parents benefit emotionally from remote work. We exploit dual social experiments in schooling and work spawned by the COVID-19 pandemic to understand any stress-reducing effects of working from home under different school-closing state policy contexts. The pandemic led to an unprecedented shift to (and subsequent away from) remote and hybrid work but also to the implementation of various containment policies, most notably school closures driving a shift to remote learning that were put into effect to different degrees across U.S. states. Drawing on parents' data from a U.S. nationally representative panel survey of workers who spent at least some time working from home since the pandemic onset, we use mixed-effects models to examine whether and in what ways cross-state and over-time variations in school closure policies shape any stress-reducing impacts of remote/hybrid work. Results show that when schools were not mandated to close, remote/hybrid work largely reduces parents'—especially mothers'—stress. However, an opposite pattern emerges in the face of closing mandates. These patterns are especially pronounced among white mothers and are not observed among nonparents.

Keywords: remote work; parents; stress; well-being; remote schooling; gender; race; COVID-19; intersectionality

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1. Introduction

Remote work has long been depicted as a way to address the often-conflicting and stressful demands between paid work and unpaid care work. Three prepandemic meta reviews ground their assessments in the presumed salutary effects of remote work in reducing stress. Bailey and Kurland (2002, p. 383) opened their review with the observation that "It [telework] has been lauded as a strategy to . . . respond to employees' needs for a healthy work–family balance." Similar assessments are made by Gajendran and Harrison (2007, p. 1524) that remote work has been "touted as means for employees to adjust their schedule to meet household needs and family demands," and Allen et al. (2015, p. 41) that "as the number of dual-earner couples climbed in the 1970s and 1980s, telecommuting was touted as an option for helping individuals manage work and family responsibilities."

Has remote work indeed delivered on the promise of reducing the stress of combining work and care obligations? Prepandemic evidence on this question is largely mixed. To offer a clearer, more nuanced picture on the stress-reducing potential of remote/hybrid work, we leverage dual social experiments in response to the COVID-19 lockdown. The COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented numbers of workers forced to move into remote work overnight, followed by a subsequent shift to hybrid for some, and for others, a mandated return to the office (Barrero et al. 2023). In addition to this mass move to remote work, state-level variations in lockdown policies simultaneously drove exogenous

variations in the number and intensity of parental childcare responsibilities on the home front. States mandated school closures aimed to curb the transmission of the virus, even as the push to remote learning pressed parents into teaching, rendering remote-working parents simultaneously childcare providers and educational assistants to their children.

Though there is suggestive evidence since the pandemic of the benefits of remote work (Carlson and Petts 2022; Fan and Moen 2023) and clear evidence regarding the strains of added childcare obligations (Calarco et al. 2020; Dunatchik et al. 2021; Ruppanner et al. 2021), the effects of both in combination is not clear. Understanding the combined effects is nevertheless important to provide a better understanding of the benefits of remote or hybrid work, which may be obscured because of school closures. Neither is it clear whether these effects differ by parents' intersecting and potentially disadvantaging social locations, such as their gender in combination with their race/ethnicity. Accordingly, we focus on the stress-reducing effects of remote/hybrid work among parents with minor children in the context of different state-level school closing policies. Given prepandemic assumptions about the stress-reducing impacts of remote work, we theorize parents should gain well-being benefits from moving to distance work—provided their children continue to be cared for through schools or other childcare arrangements. By contrast, those whose children began learning remotely might well experience additional stress when trying to simultaneously parent, teach, and work. These effects could be unevenly distributed, varying at the intersections of parents' gender and race/ethnicity. We pose two research questions. First, do the well-being implications of remote/hybrid work for parents differ according to the stringency of school closure policies? Second, to what extent do state school closure policies modify the association between work locations and stress differently or similarly across stratifying contexts at the intersections of gender and race/ethnicity?

Addressing these questions advances our understanding of the implications of new ways of working—fully or partially at home—in several ways. First, we demonstrate the scope condition of any possible stress-reducing benefits of remote work, which is not only critical to making sense of mixed evidence to date but also has important implications for developing policies that harness the well-being potential of remote work for working parents. To do so, we exploit the remote-work and remote-schooling natural experiments spawned by the COVID-19 pandemic that created an exogenous variation in both remote work and childcare obligations, allowing us to provide more robust evidence on the contexts under which remote/hybrid work is promoting or challenging parental well-being. Our findings suggest that even during the uncertainties and disruptive lockdowns of the pandemic era, there is evidence of the positive well-being effects of remote or hybrid work once the countervailing effects of school closures are taken into account. This aligns with the widespread popularity of remote or hybrid models among workers (Barrero et al. 2021; Richardson and Antonello 2022).

Second, we move beyond prior research that has exclusively focused on gender variations to assess potential differences across subgroups at the intersections of gender and race. Incorporating race in combination with gender in the conceptual and analytical framework is important because dimensions of inequality intersect in complex ways, leading to distinct social contexts that constrain the lived experiences of individuals (Cho et al. 2013; Collins and Bilge 2020; Crenshaw 1991). Documenting how broad social transformations affect the stress of individuals situated at the intersection of various social structural locations is crucial to evaluate the combined forces of structural sexism and racism (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Homan 2019; Laster Pirtle and Wright 2021).

1.1. Remote/Hybrid Work and Parental Stress: Previous Studies

Originally coined in 1973, telecommuting was initially conceived as a way to reduce traffic problems and energy consumption (Allen et al. 2015; Avery and Zabel 2001). Over time, it was gradually portrayed as a means to help individuals—especially parents—manage work and family responsibilities (Bailey and Kurland 2002). This is evident in results from a prepandemic experiment where, on average, workers report their willingness to give up

8% of their wages for the option to work from home, with the figure being especially high among women with young children, at 15.4% (Mas and Pallais 2017).

Does remote work in fact reduce stress for parents? Existing research paints a mixed picture (Allen et al. 2015; Bailey and Kurland 2002). On one hand, perceived flexibility as to where one works is associated with workers' increased sense of autonomy in managing work and family demands (Kossek et al. 2006; Maruyama and Tietze 2012), especially in their perceived ability to schedule their work hours around home demands (Gajendran and Harrison 2007; Golden et al. 2006), opening up more time for family life and other activities (Kelly and Moen 2021). In support of this framing, evidence shows that remote work lowers levels of burnout and work–life conflict (Gajendran and Harrison 2007; Golden et al. 2006). Such benefits may be especially pronounced among parents. Based on a sample of professional employees at two large information and financial services organizations, Kossek et al. (2006) show that women with children benefit more from using formal telework policies as evidenced by their lower depressive symptoms compared with men or women without children.

On the other hand, some argue that a border between work and home life is essential to give people time to recover from the demands and pressures of work (Clark 2000; Schieman and Glavin 2008; Sonnentag and Zijlstra 2006). Remote work, given its tendency to be geared to business rather than employee needs, may elevate the risk of unending efforts that extend work beyond traditional spatial, temporal, or psychological boundaries (Chesley 2014; Fan and Moen 2022; Kelliher and Anderson 2010; Noonan and Glass 2012; Russell et al. 2009). It may also blur the boundaries between work and home (Golden et al. 2006; Hyman et al. 2003; Schieman and Glavin 2008; Schieman and Young 2010; Voydanoff 2005), partly because domestic tasks become more evident when working at home, triggering employees' self-initiated interruptions to perform them (Delanoeije et al. 2019; Golden et al. 2006).

Two explanations may account for the differential findings presented in previous studies. First, given the low prevalence of remote work prepandemic, prior research did not always define remote work in a consistent way. Whereas some focus on access to telework policies (e.g., Yucel and Fan 2023), others examine actual usage of such policies (e.g., Kossek et al. 2006), and still others consider bringing work home after hours as a form of remote work (e.g., Song and Gao 2020). A consensus is gradually emerging that working at home as part of one's job has well-being benefits (Kim et al. 2020; Yang et al. 2023), but working at home in addition to a day at the office to catch up on workloads is detrimental to workers' (especially women's) well-being (Kim et al. 2020; Song and Gao 2020; Yang et al. 2023). The COVID-19 massive push to work remotely offers a strategic research site to consider, among all those whose jobs allow telework, the effects of actually working from home on parents in different contexts. Accordingly, we focus on the impacts of working from home for a substantial portion of the working week (at least two days a week), as opposed to either access to (but not utilizing) telework policies or catching up on work after the conventional work day.

A second explanation for mixed findings to date is that remote/hybrid work could have differential impacts for different subgroups. One important dimension concerns the intersection of gender and parental status, as demonstrated by several previous studies (e.g., Kossek et al. 2006; Song and Gao 2020; Yucel and Fan 2023). An analysis of the 2010, 2012, and 2013 American Time Use Survey Well-Being Modules, for example, shows that parents, especially fathers, report a lower subjective well-being when working at home on weekdays, even as nonparents' subjective well-being varies less by where they work (Song and Gao 2020). In this study, we focus exclusively on the experiences of parents, moving beyond existing research to additionally assess possible differences at the intersections of parents' gender and race/ethnicity.

1.2. Remote/Hybrid Work, Remote Schooling, and Stress during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic produced dual natural experiments that can advance understanding of remote work in two ways. First, the unprecedented increase in the absolute numbers and relative share of remote workers made it possible to assess what working from home meant for a large number of workers, greatly attenuating the selection bias problematic in much prepandemic research. Prior to COVID-19, even as working remotely was slowly becoming a part of U.S. employment culture for some, only around 10–20% civilian workers worked from home, typically on an irregular basis, an opportunity largely available to highly paid white-collar professional workers (Allen et al. 2015) or to those who self-selected into remote jobs to accommodate family needs (Bailey and Kurland 2002; Mas and Pallais 2017). Since the pandemic, it is estimated that 60% of workers have worked remotely at some point (Brenan 2020), many of whom had no or little prior remote work experience (Fan and Moen 2022). This pandemic-induced changing landscape greatly broadened the number of parents who personally experienced remote work. Second, with the closing of childcare facilities and the move to online schooling, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, parents with minor children at home found themselves de facto performing three jobs simultaneously: working, teaching, and parenting. School closure policies nevertheless varied considerably from state to state across the United States; these policies also evolved over time within each state throughout the pandemic (Hale et al. 2021). Such temporal and spatial variations in school closure policies generated different homeworking environments for parents, rendering it possible to evaluate whether the dramatic changes in parenting responsibilities related to school closures moderated potential stress effects of work location.

Our first research question therefore asks: do any stress-reducing implications of remote/hybrid work for parents differ by the stringency of school closure policies? Answering this question contributes to an emerging but still small number of pandemic studies on how the pandemic-driven move to remote work shaped workers' well-being. For example, drawing on German panel data collected before (September 2019) and during (April 2020) the pandemic (when schools and childcare facilities were closed), Möhring et al. (2021) find no effect on job or family satisfaction associated with the move to working from home, either for the overall sample or at the intersection of gender and parental status. A survey of more than 600 U.S.-based white-collar employees between late March and June 2020 shows reductions in stress and negative emotions concomitant with the move to working remotely, though family circumstances matter—those with children faring worse given their childcare responsibilities (Bernstein et al. 2020). Using a U.S. nationally representative panel survey conducted in October 2020 and April 2021, Fan and Moen (2023) show that remote workers returning to the office experience more stress, compared to those continuing to work remotely. Similar to Bernstein et al. (2020), Fan and Moen (2023) find that women and men with care obligations gain fewer emotional benefits from remote/hybrid arrangements compared with those without care obligations. Part of the reason may have to do with the added childcare demands due to the closing of schools and childcare centers, increasing time spent on housework and childcare for both remote working mothers and fathers (Dunatchik et al. 2021).

Qualitative studies additionally underscore the challenges faced by mothers of young children when working from home (Calarco et al. 2020; Çoban 2022). For example, drawing on in-depth interviews conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (April–May 2020) with mothers of young children in Southern Indiana, Calarco et al. (2020) show that the combination of disruptions in childcare arrangements and working from home leads to mothers' spending more time with their children and increased stress. Conversely, mothers with undisrupted childcare arrangements experienced increased parenting time as a source of joy in otherwise difficult times (Calarco et al. 2020). These contrasting findings indicate the importance of incorporating the school closing context to understand how remote work is associated with well-being.

Taken together, the extant evidence from both survey and interview data suggests that caregiving responsibilities may attenuate any stress-reducing benefits gained from working from home. However, most of these studies were conducted during the early days of the pandemic, when many workers, especially those who had never worked from home previously, were scrambling to adjust to new working (and childcare) environments. Another limitation of prior (quantitative) research is the use of parental status as a proxy for childcaring responsibilities, even as interview data (e.g., Calarco et al. 2020) show that parents' experiences vary considerably depending on the extent to which schools were closed. Accordingly, we leverage panel data from October 2020 to April 2022 to capture potential engagement in remote work over time in the context of temporal (within state) and geographic (across state) variation in school closure policies across U.S. states. Our goal is to understand whether the closing of schools mitigated any stress-reducing effects of remote work on parents in the United States. We expect remote/hybrid work to be stress-reducing when schools were not closed, but that an opposite pattern may emerge when schools were closed.

There may also be gender differences. Given deeply entrenched gender scripts, remote-working mothers and fathers may well be affected by school closure policies to different degrees. In light of the tensions and contradictions between the ethic of care and ideal worker norms (Acker 1990; Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Hays 1996; Moen and Roehling 2005; Williams 2001), prepandemic research shows that mothers with access to remote work are more likely to replace the time saved from commuting with childcare and household chores than are fathers (Noonan et al. 2007; Powell and Craig 2015). As a result, mothers fail to benefit as much from telecommuting in terms of extra leisure time gains compared with fathers (Hilbrecht et al. 2008; Noonan et al. 2007).

Pandemic research largely supports this gender variation. For example, relative to fathers, mothers working from home in 2020 were more likely to increase their supervisory parenting and alter their work schedules to fit family needs; by contrast, mothers and fathers working on site during the pandemic experienced smaller changes in time use (Lyttelton et al. 2023; also see Dunatchik et al. 2021). However, based on survey data collected from March, April, and November 2020, evidence also exists that parents' division of housework and childcare became more equal when fathers worked from home (Carlson and Petts 2022), suggesting that fathers may also be affected by school closure policies when working remotely. Taken as a whole, we view it as an empirical question as to whether school closure policies moderate the work location/stress interface differently for mothers and fathers.

We also expect any moderating effects of school closure policies on potential stress-reducing benefits of remote work to differ at the intersections of gender and race. A growing body of literature demonstrates that the intensive mothering ideology does not hold for racial/ethnic minorities who are simultaneously subject to racial or ethnic norms that alter the cultural definition of a "good" father or a "good" mother (Collins 2009; Dow 2016). Given the long history of labor market discrimination, men of color have difficulty in earning a family wage to financially provide for a family (Hodges and Budig 2010), leading to less emphasis placed on the domestic expectations of mothers and more on their economic contributions (Collins 2009). Consequently, the division of housework is more equal among couples of color (Collins 2009; Penha-Lopes 2006), and mothers of color tend to have more integrated conceptions of their roles as workers and caregivers (Blair-Loy and Dehart 2003; Dow 2016). School closure policies in tandem with working remotely, therefore, may not have affected the stress level of mothers of color as much as that of white mothers. Alternatively, given structural racism (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Laster Pirtle and Wright 2021), it may be more challenging for parents of color to combine home working and parenting compared with white parents in the midst of a pandemic, rendering any negative effects of school closure policies more palpable to them. For instance, during the 2020–2021 school year, when schools began to reopen, school districts with a greater representation of Black and Hispanic students were less likely to offer in-person instruction

than were districts with a greater representation of white students (Landivar et al. 2022). Parents of color, therefore, were more likely to live in school districts with prolonged and possibly more stress-inducing remote schooling. We draw on panel data to empirically adjudicate these different possibilities.

2. Data, Measures, and Methods

2.1. Data

To test our hypotheses, we drew on four waves of panel data collected from a nationally representative survey of workers who worked remotely at some point since the onset of COVID-19. The four-wave panel survey was fielded using Ipsos KnowledgePanel, the largest probability-based online panel in the United States, which reputable research organizations such as Pew also utilize. Both random-digit-dialing and address-based sampling methodologies are used to recruit KnowledgePanel members; households without an internet connection are provided with a web-enabled device and free internet service to complete online surveys. Our baseline survey was conducted in October 2020, consisting of 3017 randomly selected respondents ages 18 and above who worked remotely at some point since the onset of COVID-19 (ensured through a screening question). These respondents were surveyed again six (April 2021), twelve (October 2021), and eighteen (April 2022) months later with a follow-up rate of 76% (n = 2286), 74% (n = 2232), and 70% (n = 2107), respectively.

Given our focus on parents' well-being when working remotely or hybrid versus working at work, our analytic sample consisted of respondents with minor children living at home; we also removed 411 person-waves in which workers were either not employed or self-employed when surveyed. After further removing 31 person-waves with missing values for any variables used in the analysis, the final sample size was 1566 person-waves nested within 662 parents.

2.2. Measures

Our focal outcome was the stress experienced by working parents; accordingly, we constructed a scale of parental work–life tensions, consisting of four items that we describe below (alpha = 0.79). We created a scale as opposed to examining the four items individually, given that single-item indicators are susceptible to reliability and multiple comparisons problems. Rushed was assessed by the question "How often do you feel rushed or pressed for time?" (1 = never to 4 = often). Interrupted was captured through the question "How often are you interrupted during the work day, making it difficult to get your work done?" (1 = never to 5 = all of the time). We note that even though feeling rushed or being interrupted could change daily, the two items ask for average levels to identify parents struggling with time adequacy or focused time. Burnout, one of the most frequently used measures of worker distress (Fox et al. 2022), was assessed by the question "How often do you feel burned out by your work?" (1 = never to 4 = often). Burnout develops cumulatively over time, though it can also be affected by sudden disruptions (Bakker et al. 2014) such as added childcare responsibilities. Work–life conflict was measured using the question "How often do the demands of your job interfere with your family or personal life?" (1 = never to 4 = often).

Our key independent variable was work location. At each survey wave, respondents were asked what best described their workplace arrangements when surveyed: (1) working mainly at home; (2) working mainly away from home at a fixed location (e.g., office); (3) hybrid (i.e., about equally at home and away from home); (4) working mainly on the road from a car, truck, train, plane, hotel, or motel room; (5) working at changing client or customer locations; (6) furloughed or laid-off; (7) left my job voluntarily; and (8) other (e.g., retired, keeping house, student). We combined categories 1 and 3 to create a remote/hybrid category and combined categories 2, 4, and 5 to create a "working away from home" category, consisting overwhelmingly of those working at the work site.

State-level school closure policies came from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker data (Hale et al. 2021). The tracker collects state-specific data on a daily basis for a wide range of pandemic containment policies. For school closure, four levels were created: (0) no measures, (1) recommend closing or all schools open with alterations resulting in significant differences compared to non-COVID-19 operations, (2) require closing only some levels or categories, e.g., public schools only, and (3) require closing all levels. Separately for each state and each survey wave, we calculated the average strictness of school closure policies over the data collection period. Note that this measure does not include closures of childcare facilities, even though school closures are highly correlated with childcare facility closures (Garcia and Cowan 2022). Appendix A, Figure A1 displays trends in school closure policies across the 50 states and Washington D.C., with higher values indicating more stringent school closure policies.

We compared results across various social locational groups, first by gender and then by gender in intersection with race/ethnicity. Race/ethnicity contained four categories: non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic Blacks, non-Hispanic other, and Hispanics, which we adjusted for in all models. When conducting the intersectional analysis, we were able to distinguish only between non-Hispanic white and employees of color to ensure sufficient sample sizes.

In all models, we adjusted for respondents' age and couple status: (1) single (including a few respondents who had a spouse/partner but did not live with them), (2) spouse/partner working remotely, (3) spouse/partner working at work, and (4) spouse/partner not working. We also included college attainment, whether respondents had a preschool child, and whether respondents had a school-aged child. To capture respondents' care obligations, we controlled for who took the greatest responsibility for childcare (respondent, spouse/partner, or equal sharing) and whether respondents had adult care responsibilities. Additional covariates included sector (public, private for-profit company, and nonprofit organization), work hours, occupation (manager, nonmanagerial professional, and nonmanagerial nonprofessional workers), and experience of remote work before COVID-19, coded 1 for those who had never worked from home before the pandemic. We also controlled for respondents' work location in the previous wave (remote/hybrid or at work) to take into account respondents' continuities and changes in work locations. To capture the cross-state and over-time variation in the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic ramifications, we adjusted for state-level COVID-19 case rate and unemployment rate in each survey wave.

2.3. Methods

We applied mixed-effects models that exploited both within- and between-subject variability (Gałecki and Burzykowski 2013), which allowed us to examine how changes and continuities in work location and school closure policies shaped parental stress. Mixed-effects models are closely related to the difference-in-difference approach or fixed-effects models but are more flexible because they can include time-invariant characteristics such as race/ethnicity. We first present the results based on a model where work location and school closure policies are entered individually. We then add an interaction term between work location and school closure policies to test our key proposition on the role of school closings in modifying the stress implications of remote/hybrid work. Note that in two states (Maine and South Dakota), school closure policies remained stable over our observational window (see Appendix A, Figure A1); respondents in these two states were still included in our analysis as mixed-effects models exploit both between- and within-state variation in school closure policies. Given our intersectional analytical lens, we then test whether the results are different across subgroups at the intersections of gender and race/ethnicity.

Results were largely similar regardless of the inclusion or exclusion of the covariates (not shown but available upon request), so we present results from the full models. Missing values are minimal (less than 2%), so we used listwise deletion to handle missingness. All

models were weighted to yield findings that were nationally representative and robust to attrition.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the variables used in our analysis, first for the overall sample and then separately by gender. In our parent sample, mothers reported higher levels of work–life tensions compared with fathers (0.35 versus 0.13 on a scale from −2 to 2, $p < 0.001$). Few gender differences were found in terms of where they worked (60% remote/hybrid) or state-level school closure policies, which had an average score of 1.07 on a 0–3 scale, indicating recommended but not required closing.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics across survey waves, by gender.

	Overall (n = 1566)		**Mothers (n = 567)**		**Fathers (n = 999)**		
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	
Parental work-life tensions	0.22	0.72	0.35	0.72	0.13	0.71	***
Remote/hybrid	60%		57%		62%		
State-level school closure policy stringency	1.07	0.67	1.08	0.66	1.06	0.67	
Race/ethnicity							
Non-Hispanic white	66%		65%		66%		
Non-Hispanic Black	6%		7%		6%		
Non-Hispanic other	12%		8%		16%		***
Hispanic	16%		21%		12%		**
College attainment	72%		67%		76%		**
Age	41.15	7.77	41.16	7.13	41.14	8.23	
Couple status							
Single	11%		17%		7%		***
Spouse/partner remote work	35%		28%		39%		***
Spouse/partner onsite work	41%		49%		35%		***
Spouse/partner not working	13%		6%		19%		***
Preschooler at home	47%		42%		51%		**
School-aged child at home	73%		79%		69%		***
Childcare responsibilities							
Respondent	37%		62%		18%		***
Equal sharing	39%		33%		44%		***
Spouse/partner	24%		6%		38%		***
Adult care responsibilities	12%		16%		10%		**
Occupation							
Manager	16%		10%		21%		***
Nonmanagerial professional	51%		49%		53%		
Nonmanagerial nonprofessional	33%		41%		27%		***
Never worked from home prepandemic	42%		49%		37%		***
Sector							
Public	25%		30%		22%		**
Private for-profit company	60%		47%		70%		***
Nonprofit organization	15%		24%		9%		***
Work hours	41.05	8.6	39.01	9.72	42.59	7.28	***
Ever quit employment	15%		16%		15%		
Ever furloughed	3%		2%		4%		
State-level COVID case rate	17.79	10.43	17.73	10.38	17.84	10.48	
State-level unemployment rate	4.57	1.55	4.56	1.59	4.58	1.52	

Note: All statistics are weighted. Asterisks denote results from *t*-tests showing whether the means are significantly different between mothers and fathers. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Two-thirds of the parents in our sample were non-Hispanic whites (66%), followed by Hispanics (16%), people from nonwhite, non-Black, and non-Hispanic racial/ethnic categories (mostly Asians, 12%), and non-Hispanic Blacks (6%). The proportion of this sample who were Hispanics was higher among mothers, whereas the share of Asians was higher among fathers. About 72% of our sample held at least a college degree, especially among fathers (76% versus 67%, $p < 0.01$), reflecting the nature of telecommute-capable jobs that typically require a college degree (Dey et al. 2020). The average age was 41 for both mothers and fathers. Mothers were more likely than fathers to either be single (17% versus 7%, $p < 0.001$) or have a partner who worked at work (49% versus 35%, $p < 0.001$); fathers were more likely than mothers to have a partner who either worked remotely (39% versus 28%, $p < 0.001$) or did not work (19% versus 6%, $p < 0.001$). Mothers were more likely to take primary responsibility for childcare, with only 6% of mothers stating that their partner was the primary caregiver, and 18% of fathers claiming the same role. Mothers were additionally more likely to have adult-care responsibilities compared with fathers (16% versus 10%, $p < 0.01$).

A higher number of mothers than fathers—almost half—never worked from home prior to COVID-19 (49% versus 37%, $p < 0.001$). Most respondents (60%) in our sample of remote workers were employed by a private for-profit company, 25% were in the public sector, and 15% worked for nonprofit organizations; mothers were more likely than fathers to be in public-sector or nonprofit organizations ($p < 0.01$). Mothers also worked on average fewer hours than fathers (39 versus 43 h per week, $p < 0.001$). Even though our analytic sample consisted only of parents with a job, note that over the observational window, around 15% of this parent sample ever quit employment (for another job or out of the labor force) and about 3% were ever furloughed, with no gender difference.

3.2. Remote/Hybrid Work, School Closures, and Parental Stress

Table 2 shows results from mixed-effects regression models predicting parental stress for mothers and fathers, respectively. We first present a main effects model where work location and school closure policies were added separately, and then introduce an interaction term between the two.

Table 2. Mixed-effects regression models predicting parental work-life tensions.

	Mothers		**Fathers**	
Variables	**Model 1a**	**Model 1b**	**Model 2a**	**Model 2b**
Remote/hybrid (ref. = working at work)	−0.009	−0.231 *	−0.100 +	−0.166 *
	(0.069)	(0.096)	(0.052)	(0.081)
State-level school closure policy stringency	−0.033	−0.140 **	0.034	−0.005
	(0.038)	(0.054)	(0.039)	(0.051)
Remote/hybrid * school closure policy		0.187 **		0.062
		(0.060)		(0.057)
Race/ethnicity (ref. = non-Hispanic white)				
Non-Hispanic Black	−0.009	−0.013	−0.094	−0.092
	(0.169)	(0.168)	(0.142)	(0.142)
Non-Hispanic other	0.333 +	0.313 +	−0.038	−0.041
	(0.191)	(0.185)	(0.094)	(0.094)
Hispanic	0.176	0.175	−0.296 *	−0.286 *
	(0.115)	(0.114)	(0.118)	(0.118)
College attainment	0.194+	0.193 +	−0.108	−0.103
	(0.114)	(0.110)	(0.096)	(0.095)

Table 2. *Cont.*

	Mothers		Fathers	
Variables	**Model 1a**	**Model 1b**	**Model 2a**	**Model 2b**
Age	−0.013 *	−0.014 *	−0.005	−0.005
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Couple status (ref. = single)				
Spouse/partner remote work	−0.022	−0.031	−0.112	−0.120
	(0.131)	(0.126)	(0.098)	(0.098)
Spouse/partner onsite work	0.035	0.034	−0.160 +	−0.171 +
	(0.132)	(0.127)	(0.096)	(0.096)
Spouse/partner not working	0.189	0.204	−0.032	−0.040
	(0.168)	(0.166)	(0.105)	(0.105)
Preschooler at home	0.040	0.020	0.050	0.053
	(0.074)	(0.072)	(0.059)	(0.060)
School-aged child at home	0.016	−0.011	0.045	0.050
	(0.078)	(0.079)	(0.067)	(0.067)
Childcare responsibilities (ref. = respondent)				
Equal sharing	−0.004	−0.006	−0.110	−0.112 +
	(0.056)	(0.055)	(0.067)	(0.066)
Spouse/partner	0.120	0.093	−0.024	−0.028
	(0.096)	(0.095)	(0.076)	(0.075)
Adult care responsibilities	0.217 **	0.206 **	0.133 +	0.130 +
	(0.068)	(0.068)	(0.074)	(0.074)
Occupation (ref. = manager)				
Nonmanagerial professional	−0.212	−0.204	−0.092	−0.089
	(0.145)	(0.149)	(0.070)	(0.071)
Nonmanagerial nonprofessional	−0.307 *	−0.286 *	−0.089	−0.088
	(0.137)	(0.138)	(0.084)	(0.084)
Never worked from home prepandemic	−0.012	−0.007	−0.056	−0.055
	(0.084)	(0.084)	(0.064)	(0.064)
Sector (ref. = private for-profit company)				
Public	−0.021	−0.043	−0.019	−0.017
	(0.096)	(0.093)	(0.084)	(0.084)
Nonprofit organization	0.195 *	0.187 *	0.051	0.050
	(0.092)	(0.092)	(0.096)	(0.097)
Work hours	0.013 ***	0.013 ***	0.018 **	0.018 **
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Remote/hybrid in the previous wave (ref. = working at work)	−0.207 **	−0.183 *	−0.024	−0.017
	(0.077)	(0.074)	(0.048)	(0.049)
State-level COVID case rate	0.001	0.001	−0.000	0.000
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
State-level unemployment rate	0.010	0.007	0.020	0.019
	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Survey wave (ref. = wave 2)				
Wave 3	−0.013	−0.015	0.062	0.061
	(0.068)	(0.068)	(0.054)	(0.054)
Wave 4	−0.030	−0.038	0.085	0.082
	(0.094)	(0.093)	(0.073)	(0.073)
Constant	0.389	0.575	−0.182	−0.137
	(0.386)	(0.392)	(0.367)	(0.375)
Observations	567	567	999	999
Number of respondents	252	252	410	410

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.1$.

Results from the main effects model indicated a nonsignificant relationship between remote/hybrid work and work–life tensions for mothers (Model 1a). For fathers, working from home fully or partly predicted marginally lower stress (−0.100, $p < 0.1$, Model 2a). School closure policies did not directly affect either mothers' or fathers' well-being.

Regarding our core research question, whether state policies moderate the potential stress effects of work location, we found that this was indeed the case for mothers. In the absence of school closing policies, relative to working at work, remote/hybrid work lowered mothers' stress (−0.231, $p < 0.05$, Model 1b). However, this benefit was attenuated to a great extent with increasingly stringent school closure policies (interactions term: 0.187, $p < 0.01$, Model 1b). Figure 1 illustrates this contrast: remote/hybrid working mothers have considerably lower levels of work–life stress compared with onsite working mothers when there are no school closure policies, but the pattern reverses when all schools are required to be closed.

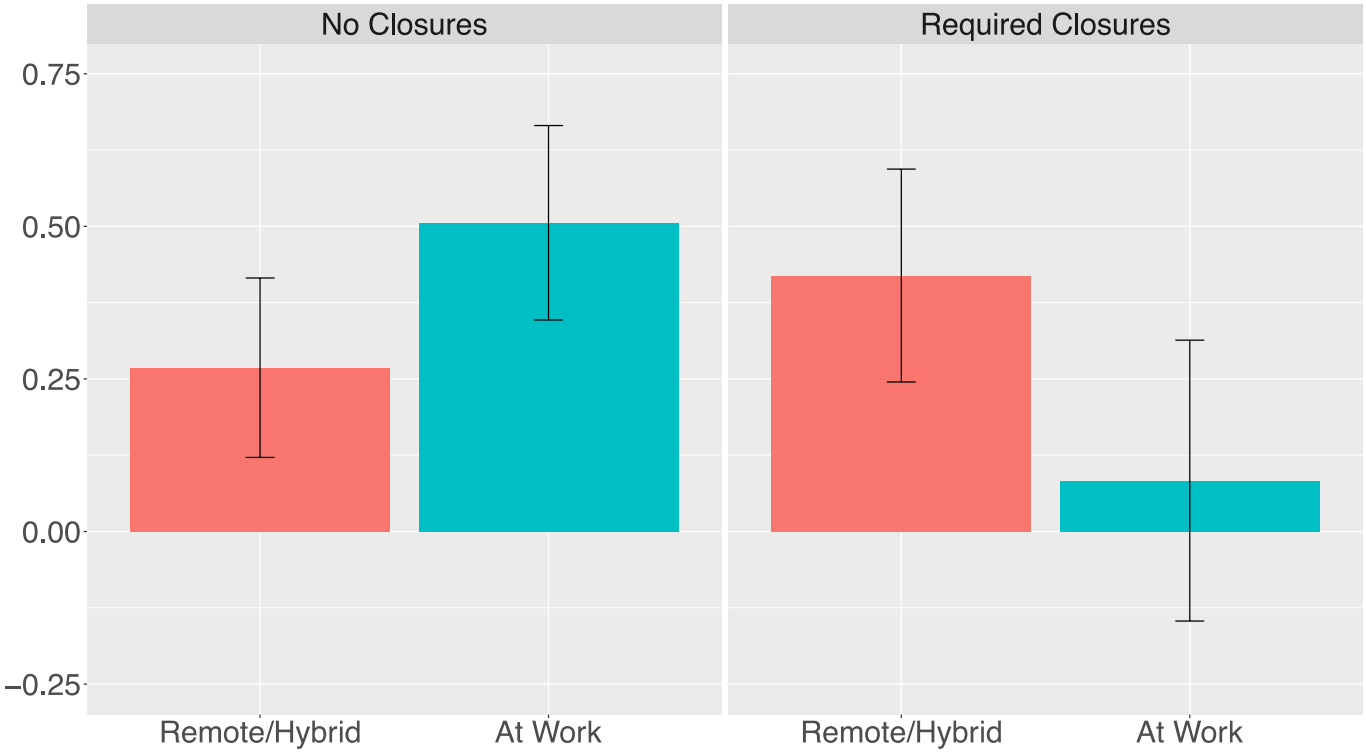

Figure 1. Predicted values of mothers' work–life tensions by work location in state remote schooling contexts.

3.3. Differences at the Intersections of Gender and Race

Did the patterns presented above differ across subgroups at the intersections of gender with race? We found white mothers shifting to remote work were the most vulnerable to the stress of school closure policies. This can be seen in Figure 2. For white mothers, when schools are not required to close, remote or hybrid work predicts lower levels of work–life tensions, relative to working at work (−0.35, $p < 0.01$). However, when schools are required to close, remote or hybrid work is associated with white mothers' higher levels of work–life tensions (0.37, $p < 0.05$). In comparison, remote schooling policies had much weaker stress effects for mothers of color or fathers in general, as shown in Figure 2 by the less pronounced gap in stress across work location or different school closure contexts.

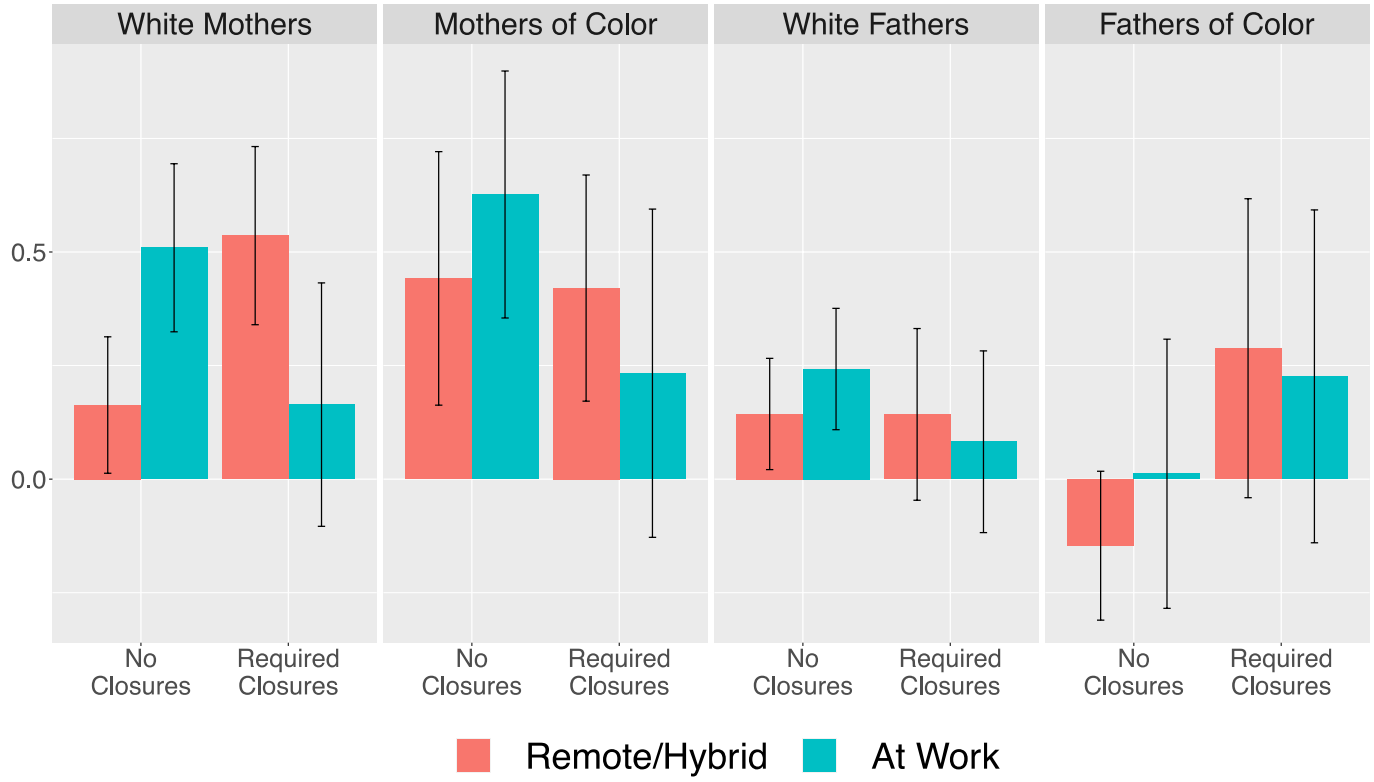

Figure 2. Predicted values of parental work–life tensions by work location in state remote schooling contexts, by race/gender intersections.

3.4. Robustness Checks

It could be argued that school closure and other pandemic containment policies affected the stress of all workers, not just those who were parents. Accordingly, we conducted parallel analyses among nonparents. Models in Appendix A, Table A1 show that the interaction terms between school closure policies and place of work are nonsignificant for nonparents, indicating that our main results are indeed reflecting remote working parents' struggles with care work when schools move to remote learning.

Given the growing popularity of hybrid work, we also examined whether findings differed between remote and hybrid arrangements. Models in Appendix A, Table A2 indicate that fully remote and hybrid do not differ from each other in terms of their influences on parental work–life tensions or how their effects are moderated by school closure policies.

4. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the landscape of where work was performed; for many parents, it also produced challenges in childcare. This put into sharp focus the fundamental mismatch that parents—and especially mothers—experience in trying to manage both work and family obligations (Acker 1990; Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Hays 1996; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Moen and Roehling 2005; Williams 2001). Pandemic-driven changes in both remote work and state-level remote schooling policies thus offered an opportunity to capture and test the effects on parental stress of the intersection of care and work. Accordingly, we drew on national representative panel data collected from October 2020 to April 2022 to examine parental stress effects of the conjoint dynamics of these two disruptions—in work location and in state school closure policies. Did state policies requiring remote schooling (and thereby escalating parental childcare obligations) obscure any salutary effects of remote or hybrid work? Were such impacts uniform, or were there gender disparities and even intersectional disparities by gender and race in these processes?

Our results contribute to existing research in several ways. Situated in a profound social change induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, our research points first to the dynamics in work and family lives during this time of unprecedented transformation; both remote work and school closing policies mandating remote learning changed across the study period form October 2020 to April 2022. Specifically, 40% of the parents in our sample moved in or out of working remotely at least once, and almost all states altered their school closing policies throughout the pandemic. This speaks to the importance of considering continuity and change in working and school arrangements and their combined effects on the stress of working parents.

Second, by leveraging the remote-work and remote-schooling natural experiments spawned by the pandemic, we demonstrated that the positive well-being effects of remote work were obscured during the pandemic by the countervailing effects of school closures. In the absence of mandated school closures, mothers and fathers working in remote or hybrid arrangements were less apt to experience work–life stress. This salutary stress-reducing effect associated with remote/hybrid work reinforces much research conducted prepandemic (for reviews, see Allen et al. 2015; Bailey and Kurland 2002; Gajendran and Harrison 2007), a time when childcare arrangements presumably did not shift markedly.

A different picture emerged when schools were required to close. Mothers working remotely reported greater stress compared with their at-work peers. These findings underscore that the conditions under which parents work and care can change, and that changes affect parental stress. Notably, only among mothers did we find a moderating effect of school closure policies, suggesting that conventional gender norms with mothers being the default caregivers remain strong. Fathers' home working, by comparison, likely takes precedence over and absolves them from caregiving responsibilities, thereby preserving the benefits they derive from remote/hybrid work.

How do we apply these findings to understand parental stress in nonpandemic times? Our research reveals that new ways of working reduce the chronic strains typically experienced by working parents, even amidst a pandemic, as long as there is well-functioning childcare support. Only in the extreme case scenario, when schools are required to close, do we find remotely working parents caught in a bind. To maximize the well-being benefits of remote/hybrid work, more policy attention is needed to address the dependent care challenges many U.S. parents face. As life returns to normal postpandemic, remote/hybrid work is very likely a crucial component of workplace flexibility (Barrero et al. 2021; Bloom et al. 2022) that benefits the well-being of parents, especially mothers. Conversely, mandatory returning to the office could elevate the already high levels of stress that contemporary parents are facing (e.g., Fan and Moen 2023).

Third, the effects of the combination of the two disruptions in where parents work and where their children are mandated to learn are contingent on parents' structural locations. In this case, not only gender, but gender in intersection with race/ethnicity moderated any reduction or increase in our measures of stress. Remote-working mothers in general, but especially remote-working white mothers, were the most susceptible to the stress of added childcare obligations brought about by school closure mandates.

While we cannot pinpoint the exact explanation for this finding, several factors may play a role. Given the uneven distribution of single parents across racial groups, it is likely that nonwhite parents—especially nonwhite mothers—had to exit the labor market (and therefore our analytic sample) to care for their children. However, post hoc analysis indicated that the probability of leaving work was similar between white mothers (2.09%) and mothers of color (2.03%), suggesting that labor force exits are unlikely to be driving our findings. Another possibility is that, compared with mothers of color who may feel less bound by the "cult of domesticity" (Collins 2009; Dow 2016), white mothers are more likely to take on the great majority, if not all, childcare and household labor (Penha-Lopes 2006), rendering the move to remote schooling particularly challenging for them to manage while working from home. In addition, it is likely that Black, Hispanic, and Asian American families are more prone to receiving support from their extended family members, given

that multigenerational households are more prevalent among racial/ethnic minorities (Pew Research Center 2022), who also tend to have larger fictive kin networks (Taylor et al. 2013). Future research is needed to better understand the different findings at the intersections of gender and race.

There are a number of limitations to this research. First, in addition to the wide variation across states in school closure policies, within-state policy variation in timing and stringency also existed, especially in states where mandates were weak. Future research should explore further such local variations. Second, given our focus on work location, we did not include parents who left the labor force, many of whom—especially mothers—did so precisely because of heighted childcare demands (Landivar et al. 2020). Therefore, we may have underestimated the parental stress at the peak of remote schooling. Missing as well were workers in occupations requiring in-person work—particularly prevalent among less-educated workers and workers in historically disadvantaged social locations. Our findings cannot be easily generalized to these workers given the distinct nature of the occupations they hold; the well-being implications of remote work for parents holding non-telecommute-capable jobs should be key topics for further investigation. Third, given the sample sizes, we were unable to obtain estimates for some intersecting subgroups, e.g., by gender and each individual racial group. Future research with larger subgroup populations is needed to capture differences across and within subgroups differentially disadvantaged in labor market and home contexts.

In sum, this is a study of parents at particular times and places experiencing a sea change in their work and family lives during COVID-19. But it has much broader implications for life beyond COVID-19, pointing to the absence of fit between institutional logics around work as demanding total commitment and parenting requiring total commitment, both overlaid by gendered assumptions about the devotions to each (Blair-Loy 2003). Scholars studying the fundamental mismatch between these two institutions—work and family—embedded in enduring gender, race, and class inequities, are well poised to move from documenting disparities in stress arising from conflicting goals, timetables, and resources to assessing how these might be ameliorated as innovative templates such as remote or hybrid work emerge. To that end, research is needed on better and more equitable ways to care for children to be sure, but also on policies opening up opportunities for governing the spatial and temporal organization of work—greater schedule flexibility, remote/hybrid work options, and reduced work-hour strategies such as the four-day workweek. The pandemic may be fading into the past, and changes are occurring in fits and starts, but the structural constraints perpetuated by institutionalized work and care norms and policies unfortunately remain.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data will be made publicly available within three years of the end of the project.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Mixed-effects regression models predicting the work–life tensions of nonparents.

	Women without Children		Men without Children	
Variables	**Model 1a**	**Model 1b**	**Model 2a**	**Model 2b**
Remote/hybrid (ref. = working at work)	−0.138 ***	−0.153 *	−0.123 **	−0.086
	(0.042)	(0.062)	(0.040)	(0.057)
State-level school closure policy stringency	−0.052 +	−0.061	0.001	0.023
	(0.031)	(0.040)	(0.030)	(0.040)
Remote/hybrid * school closure policy		0.014		−0.033
		(0.044)		(0.042)
Observations	1485	1485	1487	1487
Number of respondents	622	622	622	622

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. All models control for the covariates included in Table 2 (except for childcare responsibilities); they are not shown for simplicity but are available upon request. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.1$.

Table A2. Mixed-effects regression models predicting parental work–life tensions.

	Mothers		Fathers	
Variables	**Model 1a**	**Model 1b**	**Model 2a**	**Model 2b**
Work location (ref. = remote)				
Working at work	−0.022	0.218 *	0.126 *	0.218 *
	(0.077)	(0.104)	(0.056)	(0.089)
Hybrid	−0.073	0.007	0.070	0.185 *
	(0.106)	(0.182)	(0.048)	(0.081)
State-level school closure policy stringency	−0.034	0.050	0.036	0.077
	(0.038)	(0.045)	(0.039)	(0.051)
Work location * school closure policy				
Working at work * school closure policy		−0.189 **		−0.084
		(0.062)		(0.061)
Hybrid * school closure policy		−0.034		−0.107
		(0.120)		(0.069)
Observations	567	567	999	999
Number of respondents	252	252	410	410

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. All models control for the covariates included in Table 2; they are not shown for simplicity but are available upon request. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Figure A1. Trends in state-level stringency of school closure policies, October 2020 to April 2022.

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Enforced Togetherness: Change and Continuity in Relationship Satisfaction among Parents during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Marni Fritz [1,†], Sejin Um [2,*,†] and Barbara J. Risman [1]

[1] Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL 60607, USA; mfritz6@uic.edu (M.F.); brisman@uic.edu (B.J.R.)
[2] Department of Sociology, New York University, New York, NY 10003, USA
* Correspondence: sejinum@nyu.edu
† These authors contributed equally to this work.

Abstract: This paper investigates how the sharp increase in time spent at home due to COVID-19-related restrictions shaped parents' relationship satisfaction with their partners. Drawing on 78 in-depth interviews with heterosexual partnered parents with at least one child aged 18 or under, we find that this experience of what we call "enforced togetherness" had varied effects on couples' relationships. More than half of the respondents (fifty-five percent) reported improved relationship satisfaction, while fifteen percent reported a decline, and the remaining thirty percent no change. Individuals with higher satisfaction took advantage of enforced togetherness and sought out more frequent and intense communication and leisure activities, underscoring the importance of spending time in strengthening relationships. On the other hand, those who were unable or unwilling to engage in these activities, due to lack of support for increased care needs and their continued uneven distribution across the couple, saw their relationships deteriorate. Finally, individuals experienced stability in their relationships when their prior routines and arrangements remained largely undisrupted by the pandemic. Our findings shed light on the significance of time as a valuable resource for couples' relationships, while at the same time emphasizing the role of their agency in its utilization.

Keywords: relationships; parents; time; confinement; COVID-19

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1. Introduction

One of the most noticeable ways the COVID-19 pandemic changed people's daily lives was by confining them to their homes. Social distancing measures, lockdowns, and event cancellations left people spending an unprecedented amount of time in their households. Changes in how people structured and lived their lives were pronounced for partnered parents, especially for those who shifted to remote work and/or managed remote schooling for their children. While the duration of such confinement varied by state-level and employer policies, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the pandemic had sharply increased the time people were now spending with their partners and children.

We examine this experience of being home-bound with one's family due to pandemic-related restrictions on mobility and social gathering, or what we call "enforced togetherness", and its varied consequences for how satisfied parents are in their relationships with their partners. Drawing on 78 in-depth interviews with married or cohabiting heterosexual parents with at least one child aged 18 or under, we find that parents' relationship trajectories during the pandemic diverged depending on *whether* and *how* they spent the increased amount of time made available to them. More than half of our interviewees—fifty-five percent—reported that they became more satisfied with their relationships than before the pandemic. They utilized the extra available time by engaging in effective communication and joint recreation, activities that they could not readily afford in the pre-pandemic era.

About fifteen percent of our sample, in contrast, reported a decline in their relationships. Most of these respondents reported that the enforced togetherness brought more stress and anxiety both individually and between the couple. The remaining thirty percent reported stability in their relationship quality and satisfaction throughout the pandemic.

In what follows, we review the literature on couples' relationship dynamics generally and specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the effects of time, stress, and communication. Next, we explain our data and methods and discuss our findings. Finally, we discuss the implications of our results for scholarship on how the pandemic impacted relationships and how work modalities influence relationships and life satisfaction, and suggest directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Stressors on Relationships

Research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on couple's relationships to date tends to paint a bleak picture, characterizing it as an externally imposed crisis causing various stressors, such as uncertainty and anxiety from contracting the virus, confinement, and lack of social interactions (Bretaña et al. 2023; Cénat and Dalexis 2020). This largely corroborates pre-pandemic research on stress and intimate relationships (see Randall and Bodenmann 2009 for a review), which shows that stressful life events such as economic pressure (Conger et al. 1999), illness (Bolger et al. 1996), and daily stress from work and other spheres of life (Harper et al. 2000; Story and Repetti 2006) negatively impact relationships.

Much pandemic research on relationships focused on how people were coping with work and caregiving responsibilities as paid work shifted to remote work, childcare facilities closed, and schools went online. It highlights an intensified burden on parents, borne disproportionately by women (Collins et al. 2021; Dunatchik et al. 2021; Mooi-Reci and Risman 2021; Calarco et al. 2021). This body of work shows how these stressors make individuals prone to experiencing an increase in both the frequency and intensity of conflicts with partners (Balzarini et al. 2023; Ishikawa 2020; Lima et al. 2020; Vigl et al. 2022). Studies vary on the specific mechanisms of this impact, including fears about health and finances, as well as emotional exhaustion. All of these issues can potentially trigger problematic behaviors and lower relationship quality.

Research has also shown that the COVID-19 pandemic created other stressors, such as disruptions in employment arrangements. Drawing on German data, Schmid et al. (2020) find that, on average, relationship satisfaction decreased for both men and women following the onset of the pandemic. This decrease in relationship satisfaction happened regardless of whether their employment situation changed during this time or not. This suggests that COVID-19-related changes in employment were not the primary factor impacting relationships. Overall, studies with data collected early in the pandemic highlight that, as stress levels increased among individuals, spousal support and marital satisfaction decreased.

However, some research suggests that the pandemic may have had an unexpected positive impact on couples. Using data on cohabiting couples in Canada and the United States, Ascigil et al. (2023) report that those who were satisfied with the quality of time with their partners reported higher relationship satisfaction during the first year of the pandemic. This finding is echoed by Vigl et al.'s (2022) cross-national study of cohabiting and noncohabiting couples which shows that the reduction in shared activities with a partner leads to a decrease in relationship satisfaction. Together, these studies underscore the emotional dimensions and temporal investments in relationships as pivotal factors shaping outcomes during pandemic challenges. This is consistent with research on natural disasters which finds that the exposure to disasters often mobilizes people to turn to their intimate relationships to cope with loss of resources (Fredman et al. 2010) and to take significant action in their close relationships, such as the transition to marriage (Cohan and Cole 2002).

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced both challenges and opportunities for relationship satisfaction. Remote work and increased shared time might increase satisfaction, but external stressors, employment changes, and the presence of children with daycares and schools shut introduce possible negative factors for relationships. There is yet no consensus on if or how the pandemic era has affected couples' relationships. It is unclear if enforced togetherness by itself would influence how satisfied respondents were in their relationships. Past research, however, suggests that enforced togetherness needs to be studied in context, including attention to external stressors and the quality of a couple's communication. The direction of change in relationship satisfaction surely depends on not only whether they experienced stress-inducing disruptions in their arrangements of work, family, and personal lives but also how they coped with such changes over time in an era of enforced togetherness. As the initial stressors of the pandemic became the "new normal", little is understood about the effects of external stresses on relationships. This study is one attempt to update this issue and one of the first qualitative research studies to do so.

2.2. Effects of Time on Relationships

Time is an unequally distributed resource that many individuals, especially working parents, find scarce, given the intense demands from both the workplace and home life (Jacobs and Gerson 2001). For the employed parent, the job puts a ceiling on the time spent on a couple relationship and on caretaking. The issue is not only how much time is allocated to family but how the intensity of work and conditions of the workplace influence the quality of family time and leisure spent as a couple. This "time bind" is especially true for dual-income families, where both partners juggle paid work and family responsibilities (Jacobs and Gerson 2001; Wajcman 2014).

Pre-pandemic research suggests that having enough quality time is important to couples (Flood and Genadek 2016; Roxburgh 2006; Shafer et al. 2018; Stolarski et al. 2016). Individuals report higher levels of happiness and meaningfulness and lower levels of stress when they are able to spend time with their spouses (Flood and Genadek 2016). Dissatisfaction with time spent with family is a widespread experience, cutting across class and gender lines, contrasting with findings on general time pressures (Roxburgh 2006). According to one study by Roxburgh (2006), only one-fifth of working men and women are satisfied with the time they spend with their spouses and children when taking into consideration workplace support, long work hours, housework demands, and childcare demands. While there were no gendered differences in dissatisfaction, it is interesting to note that while men simply wanted an increase in the time spent with their partners, women in the study emphasized their desire for an increase in quality time with their partner (Roxburgh 2006).

While experiencing dissatisfaction with the amount of time shared with spouses is a constant experience across gender and class lines, taking a closer look, there do appear to be nuances to the intensity of that dissatisfaction. Shafer et al. (2018) reveal how the demands of long hours influence time satisfaction for heterosexual couples, reporting that women married to men working more than 50 h per week have significantly higher perceived time stress when compared to women married to men working between 35 and 49 h per week. Interestingly, the number of hours women worked did not influence their male spouse's perceived time stress. Low-income couples reportedly have fewer opportunities for shared time with their spouses, and the time they did spend with their partners was marked by increased stress when compared to high-income couples (Williamson and Schouweiler 2023). We do expect that for respondents who experienced serious time shortages while juggling work and family before the pandemic and become remote workers, the extra time at home may increase their personal and relationship satisfaction.

2.3. Effects of Communication on Relationships

Partners with strong communication skills report higher relationship satisfaction. Based on their research studying the relationships between marital satisfaction, division

of labor in the home, and communication, using survey data, Carlson et al. (2020) argue, "strong communication skills help couples improve the long-term, global health of the relationship in a positive and constructive fashion that leads to mutual satisfaction". In a study seeking to determine whether relationship satisfaction led to sexual satisfaction or vice versa, researchers found that there was not a direct relationship between the two variables, but rather it was a third variable, communication, that actually influenced relationship satisfaction (Byers 2005). This study of eighty-seven individuals in long-term relationships showed that an increase in communication quality led to increased relationship satisfaction, and a decrease in communication quality led to a decrease in relationship satisfaction.

Whether or not communication leads to satisfaction, however, is not entirely clear. Lavner et al. (2016) find that satisfaction was a slightly better predictor of couples' communication rather than the other way around. In other words, a correlation exists, but causation is not so clear. Another study using longitudinal data showed that when couples had fewer negative interactions, it generally meant that they were happier in their relationship at that moment (Johnson et al. 2022). But feeling happy because of positive interactions did not seem to affect their overall satisfaction with the relationship as much, suggesting that the way a couple communicates might be more of a reflection of their relationship satisfaction rather than the other way around.

Stress on relationships also appears to have an influence on communications between partners. In their study comparing distressed couples with non-distressed couples, Burleson and Denton (1997) show that the distressed couples observed were not lacking in communications skills per se but showed signs of ill will in their communications, pointing to "spousal motivations" as the key influence of effective communication. Zemp et al. (2017) show that child-related stress is generally linked to lower relationship satisfaction, as well as communication quality. Couples with high child-related stress have impaired communication strategies, leading to an overall communication decline in the relationship. In a time of high stress such as COVID-19, with many opportunities for even higher child-related stress due to school closures, daycare closures, and at-home schooling, one might expect to see relationship communication decline as a result. There does not appear to be a strong empirical basis to support the causality between the correlation that exists between communication and relationships satisfaction.

3. Materials and Methods

To understand how and why parents' relationship satisfaction with their partners changed over the course of the pandemic, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 78 women and men in heterosexual marriages or cohabiting unions with at least one child aged 18 or under. These women and men are not partnered with each other, and these data thus represent an individual's narrative of how his or her relationship unfolded. While the interviewees' partners may have a different point of view of their relationship trajectory, we were nonetheless able to gain rich and detailed accounts of the respondents' perceptions of how their partners understood the shared experience in the household.

The study's sample was recruited as part of a larger study, where a nationally representative sample of American adults with childcare or elder-care responsibilities were collected via the National Opinion Research Center's AmeriSpeak survey (NORC at the University of Chicago 2022). AmeriSpeak is an online survey panel. Our team asked if people responsible for caregiving for either children or the elderly would be willing to be interviewed. We contacted everyone who answered yes to the question on that survey and met the eligibility criteria for being partnered and having childcare or elder-care responsibilities. The response rate was approximately 25 percent. The zoom interviews were not part of the AmeriSpeak project, but we used their representative panel to find interview respondents. The interviews were conducted from June 2021 to February 2022, all via Zoom, and lasted between forty minutes and two and a half hours. The interviews began 16 months after the pandemic began, so that we could capture changes the respondents felt

happened over more than a year. During the latter half of the data collection process, we asked the respondents to refer to acquaintances that fit the larger study's eligibility criteria to increase the sample size. This generated a dozen additional interviews. We find no perceptual differences in the interviews with those from the AmeriSpeak data and others.

This research is part of a larger study of work and caregiving during the pandemic. The interview scheduled was collaboratively designed to provide the respondents' narrative understanding of how the pandemic was shaping their work and caregiving experiences. The interview began with questions about household and care responsibilities before the pandemic and then proceeded with questions about changes in work and personal responsibilities over the course of the pandemic. The next module of questions focused on life satisfaction before and during the pandemic, including focus on employment and couple relationships. We then asked about adaptation to the pandemic in caretaking, schooling, and domestic experiences, as well as changes in mental and physical health. We then followed up with questions about social policies enacted during the pandemic and possible future policies to help parents balance work and family responsibilities. Lastly, we gathered demographic information, including race, income, geographical information, religion, political orientation, and educational status. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and coded by the authors and their colleagues of the larger study. The two first co-authors of this article further coded the 78 respondents of this study, focusing on relationship-related themes. Given the scale of these data and size of our research team, we used a flexible coding approach for the initial round of coding. Flexible coding is useful for large-scale interview data such as ours and involves "starting big with index coding" and attribute coding before applying more fine-grained thematic codes (Deterding and Waters 2021). We began with attribute coding and then coded the data for each research question. For this analysis, we then reread each transcript and analyzed it for themes relating specifically to the experience of spending more time together during the pandemic. The first two co-authors reiteratively coded the data when themes emerged that appeared to be related to the time each respondent spent with his or her partner during the pandemic. We went back to each full transcript and applied the detailed thematic codes to capture more nuanced dimensions of each theme related to time spent together. In this step, clear patterns and themes emerged which we discuss as key findings below.

The sample consists of 46 women and 32 men aged 26 to 61 (mean = 39) who are partners and parents. Despite efforts to diversify the racial identities of the sample, more than seventy percent is non-Hispanic White. Ninety-two percent are married, while the remaining eight percent are cohabiting. Nearly two-thirds are in dual-earner households, where both partners worked full-time jobs; one-third of the respondents are in traditional or neotraditional households, where the female partner was out of the workforce or employed part-time (i.e., less than 30 h a week). The sample is nearly equally split between those with a high school degree or some college, a college degree, and graduate education, representing a significantly more educated sample than the overall population. Relatedly, many of our respondents hold jobs with high levels of occupational prestige. This study may thus not fully capture the diverse range of experiences and challenges faced by less-educated couples or those in less prestigious occupations, which may have implications for the generalizability of our findings.

We used pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. As noted above, the sample reflects only one partner's perception of the couple's relationship trajectories. This limits our ability to ascertain whether or how couples may have diverging outlooks on their relationships despite shared experiences—a critical issue for future studies. Another limitation to this sample is that because we interviewed people at least 16 months after the start of the pandemic, those most affected and least satisfied with their partners may have already divorced. Table 1 presents a descriptive summary of the sample, delineating variations in relationship satisfaction, categorized as increased, decreased, or unchanged.

Table 1. Descriptive summary according to relationship outcome.

		Increased		Decreased		No Change		Total	
		N	Proportion	N	Proportion	N	Proportion	N	Proportion
Gender									
	Male	19	0.44	3	0.27	10	0.42	32	0.41
	Female	24	0.56	8	0.73	14	0.58	46	0.59
Household type									
	Dual-earner	25	0.58	4	0.36	14	0.58	52	0.67
	Breadwinner *	9	0.21	5	0.45	6	0.25	16	0.21
	One Partner PT **	9	0.21	2	0.18	4	0.17	10	0.13
Age range									
	20–29	2	0.05	1	0.09	1	0.04	4	0.05
	30–39	23	0.53	5	0.45	10	0.42	38	0.49
	40–49	16	0.37	4	0.36	9	0.38	29	0.37
	50 or older	2	0.05	1	0.09	4	0.17	7	0.09
Race and Ethnicity									
	Non-Hispanic White	33	0.77	8	0.73	16	0.67	57	0.73
	Non-Hispanic Black	4	0.09	1	0.09	4	0.17	9	0.12
	Hispanic	3	0.07	2	0.18	2	0.08	7	0.09
	Non-Hispanic Other	3	0.07	0	-	2	0.08	5	0.06
Marital Status									
	Married	42	0.98	9	0.82	21	0.88	72	0.92
	Cohabiting	1	0.02	2	0.18	3	0.13	6	0.08
Number of Children									
	1	15	0.35	1	0.09	8	0.33	24	0.31
	2	16	0.37	5	0.45	8	0.33	29	0.37
	3	8	0.19	1	0.09	4	0.17	13	0.17
	4 or more	4	0.09	4	0.36	4	0.17	12	0.15
Educational Attainment									
	High school	3	0.07	0	-	1	0.04	4	0.05
	Some college	13	0.30	4	0.36	6	0.25	23	0.29
	College graduate	13	0.30	3	0.27	9	0.38	25	0.32
	Postgraduate	14	0.33	4	0.36	8	0.33	26	0.33
		43	0.93	11	0.34	24	0.31	78	

* All but one breadwinner was the husband. ** All but three part-time workers were wives.

Importantly, this study differs from previous studies on the COVID-19 pandemic and relationships in that we collected the data more than a year after the pandemic started. By the time of the interview, respondents had moved past the dramatic disruptions that occurred in the early months of the pandemic, such as the first experience of lockdowns, e.g., the closing of public schools and childcare institutions. In other words, the respondents were largely distanced from the initial turmoil that marks the pandemic experiences examined in previous research. They were well-situated to take stock of their early experiences of the pandemic, to make changes to their lives, or to maintain the changes they made during this time based on such experiences. This may partly explain why, as we later show, many of the participants found their relationships to have improved, despite some high-intensity conflicts early in the pandemic.

We asked questions about participants' work and home lives, covering the period from before the pandemic began, through the initial months, and up to the present state during the interview. We also asked a variety of questions about the respondents' relationship with their partner before the pandemic and how it changed over the course of the pandemic to the present. We first asked how satisfied they were with their relationship and why. Whenever they expressed ambivalence or negative feelings, we asked why and what they wished had unfolded differently. We also inquired about changes in the respondent's

partner's employment situation; how they affected the partner's well-being, as well as his or her own; and whether and how he or she dealt with the challenges brought on by these changes.

4. Results

4.1. Enforced Togetherness

All respondents in our sample spent significantly more time at home with their partners since the pandemic began than they had before, due to changes in work situations (e.g., remote work and job loss), limitations to social activities in public spaces (e.g., stay-at-home orders and social distancing), or both. We call this sustained condition of being home-bound together with one's partner in place of pre-pandemic activities and routines *enforced togetherness*.

Interviewees' experiences varied in terms of the duration and intensity of enforced togetherness. Couples for whom either one or both partners transitioned to working from home and sustained this arrangement over an extended period underwent radical transformations in their daily lives. As one such example, Robert, a 40-year-old father of two who works in data management, said the following:

> The number one change that comes to mind first is the amount of time that we spent at home. . . everything has become more centralized to the home. When the pandemic began, schooling was at home, working at home, eating at home all the time. Any type of family activities or social activities would be at home. No outside activities.

Yet, even in cases where none of the partners worked from home or lived in regions where social-distancing measures were imposed for only briefly, couples nonetheless found themselves spending more leisure time at home, such as after-work evening hours and weekends. For instance, Monique, a 46-year-old clinical laboratory scientist and a mother of one, continued to work in-person throughout the pandemic, and so did her husband. Nevertheless, the increased time spent at home was the defining characteristic of her pandemic experience: "Since we really couldn't go out to do anything, we stayed at home together, so we did spend a lot of time together".

As we later show, despite shared experiences of enforced togetherness, interviewees varied in terms of whether and how their relationship with their partners changed since the pandemic began (see Figure 1). To explain such divergences, we turn to an analysis of *how* they spent the time brought by enforced togetherness.

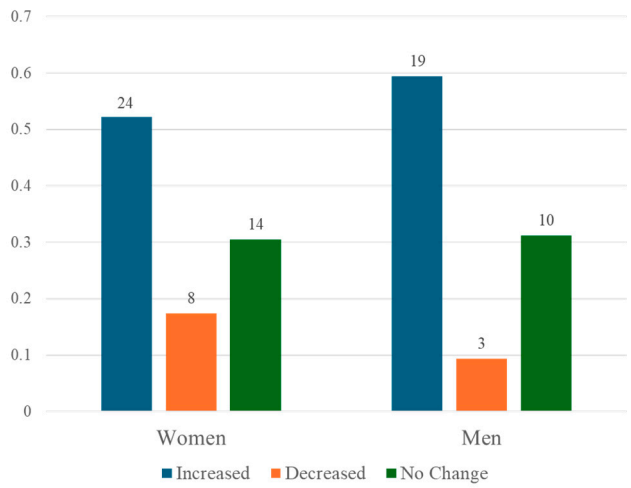

Figure 1. Pandemic outcomes on relationship satisfaction by gender. Note: The bars indicate the proportions within each gender group.

4.2. Increased Relationship Satisfaction

More than half of the people in our sample (42 out of 78) reported that their relationship satisfaction increased compared to before the pandemic. Many in this group noted the transition to remote work and its associated changes, such as reduced travel and flexible schedules, as contributing to more time with their partners. While such adjustments initially created disruptions that were stressful, respondents eventually came to enjoy the extra time and energy that they were afforded. Respondents reported a consistent desire for more leisure and family time away from work, and the pandemic provided them with such a gift. Such positive experiences during the pandemic were equally salient for individuals across household types.

Tommy, a 39-year-old father of one and government employee, had steadily worked from home full-time since the beginning of the pandemic, and so did his wife, a video game programmer. Tommy acknowledged the benefits of the enforced togetherness, noting that the increased time spent with his wife and son was a welcome change from their previous hectic schedules: "The forced togetherness time has been really good for us because we just never seemed to have enough of it before. That's probably my big pro. As I said, we've been lucky". Juggling childcare responsibilities and remote schooling with his partner, Tommy valued the flexibility and family-focused reprioritization brought about by telecommuting. Enforced togetherness seems to have a clear positive impact on couples that were overworked and who previously lacked the time that they would have liked to spend with their partners and children.

The interviewees in this group echoed similar narratives that they found pleasure in spending ample time with their partners, which required extra special effort in their overworked lives before the pandemic. Despite the initial stress and challenges, Diane, a 26-year-old daycare worker and mother of three, reflected on their experience as a couple, suggesting that the pandemic did not fundamentally alter the way they operated in their relationship but provided them with the gift of time: "I don't think that the pandemic really changed anything for us. It just gave us time to be together more".

Similarly, Joanna, a 35-year-old mother of two and software developer, said: "When we were both remote, we would take a morning walk with the dogs and that was just really nice that was something that we've never really had time to do". Jennifer, a 32-year-old college administrator and mother of one, similarly noted: "We have lunch together, every day we make coffee when I get home from daycare drop off, so I feel like our relationship is a lot stronger as well when we're both home". In a different interview, Tommy complemented these sentiments with his own story: "we almost never got to sit down other than on the weekends. We didn't get to sit down to a family dinner hardly ever. . . and we're sitting down to three meals a day during the pandemic now, and that's been kind of nice".

It is noteworthy that rather than perceiving this enforced togetherness as a strain, couples who saw their relationship satisfaction increase proactively engaged in meaningful interactive activities. The women and men in this group attributed such outcomes to the high frequency and intensity of what we call *quality couple time*, activities that both partners participate in together, actively nurturing and deepening their emotional bonds. Quality couple time is distinct from time spent in the partner's presence at home, something that enforced togetherness increased for all individuals in our sample. It is also different from what we typically call family time, which tends to revolve around the care and entertainment of one's children rather than one's spouse or romantic partner. Instead, the term "quality couple time" highlights the couple's use of enforced togetherness to engage in interactive activities with *each other* that provide opportunities for connection and intimacy, rather than merely co-existing in the same physical space or performing caregiving tasks for their children. It includes having deep conversations about their feelings, concerns, and grievances about each other and participating in leisure and entertainment activities together. For example, when asked about how the pandemic changed his relationship, Jack, a father of two children under six working in-person as a power plant technician throughout the pandemic, reflected as follows:

> [W]e had to communicate a lot more. Because we were around each other so much more frequently, you know, we spent a lot more time talking to each other, working out little minor things. . . we do little projects together, and then you know, caring for the kids. Definitely strengthened it. . . It got better.

Here, we see how, in addition to simply being around each other more, Jack highlights the importance of both communication and shared activities with his spouse—with or without their children—in contributing to their overall increased relationship satisfaction, encapsulating this concept of quality couple time. We detail these two factors in turn.

Leisure activities. One way that respondents engaged in quality couple time was through enjoying leisure activities with their partners at home or in their neighborhood. These activities usually meant relishing the simple pleasures in life, such as cooking together, eating together, doing puzzles, playing games, and taking long walks together. While they may be simple, respondents noted that they were nonetheless not readily attainable prior to the pandemic, given work commitments, long and exhausting commutes, and other social obligations that took place outside their homes. Indeed, many interviewees lamented the loss of such social interactions with friends, colleagues, and extended family members. However, they remarked on the joys of being able to spend leisure time with their families and cited this as the best parts of their pandemic experience.

Don, a 35-year-old salesman and father of one, had always wanted to spend more time with his wife but always found his work encroaching on his time and energy. The pandemic had been a blessing, as it finally allowed him to align his values with his action and "walk the walk":

> I've always talked about family being the number one thing in my life, but I wasn't living by that value when I was working, commuting and doing all those other things. Now I get to actually walk the talk. . .. So I've put things in a better perspective for my wife and I and our household. And because of that, I think it's become strengthened. I think that's why we've been blessed.

Edith, a 38-year-old mother of four and office secretary, echoed this sentiment. Although neither Edith nor her husband could work from home, the mere absence of social events on workday evenings and on the weekends allowed them to focus more on each other. They made a deliberate decision to shut off their electronic devices and to entertain themselves with inexpensive activities, such as card games and board games. She explained as follows:

> I think our relationship grew stronger because, it's like, okay, everyone put down the phones, everybody's home, we're going to do family stuff . . . I guess the best part would be that it forced us to think outside the box. Like, what can we do that's not going to involve us having to go anywhere, but still have fun and spend time together? It just brought us closer as a family.

Communication. The respondents in this group said they also experienced a notable increase in the frequency and quality of communication with their partners during this period of enforced togetherness. The increased availability of time—and energy—allowed couples to break away from their routine inertia and engage in long conversations about topics that they had not previously had the time to discuss, such as life goals, values, and parenting strategies. Discussing such topics both reflected and cemented their shared futures and commitment toward each other, bringing them closer together.

Kevin, a 42-year-old father of three and athletic director at a local college, started to work from home for the first few months of the pandemic and then changed his job to a permanent hybrid position which allowed him to stay home four days of the week. Meanwhile, his wife lost her job for over a year as a part-time instructional aide in an elementary school and had only recently returned to her job by the time of the interview. Both found themselves with more time and energy than they ever had before, which allowed them to discuss critical issues that they had not previously. As Kevin explained:

> We're more in tune with each other's emotions. We communicated those emotions better because we spent more time together . . . Now we have talked about the plan five years from now, and we set goals, which aren't things we did before. So, I think that improved our relationship and the way we feel about each other, too, because now we're talking about 10 years from now where we want to be and what we want to do.

Belicia, a 33-year-old mother of two and dental hygienist, also emphasized that enforced togetherness offered her and her husband an opportunity for self-reflection and open communication about their thoughts and feelings:

> The one good thing about the pandemic shaking things up—it gave us more time to think about things that we needed to strengthen between parenting, marriage, giving out tasks and everything. I think sometimes everybody just gets used to their day-to-day and get in the habit of just going through the motions without feeling or without really questioning what needs to improve. The pandemic kind of helped us just take a step back and be like hey, we can actually improve this aspect. . . like, take a step back and be able to open up, communicate more, so we know what each other wants and expects. . . we're able to like, open the gates to better communication, which makes a healthier relationship overall.

In essence, the pandemic served as a catalyst for couples to engage in more frequent, meaningful, and profound conversations. These discussions, coupled with the challenges faced collectively, contributed to a significant improvement in communication dynamics and, consequently, enhanced relationship satisfaction for many participants.

Additionally, for several respondents in this group (n = 8), a move toward a more equitable division of household labor emerged as a significant factor contributing to relationship satisfaction. Before the pandemic, one partner in the couple—typically the woman—did a disproportionate share of the routine household chores and childcare activities, such as cooking for and feeding the children and doing the laundry and cleaning. However, enforced togetherness during the pandemic heightened men's awareness of their partners' substantial contributions at home, prompting them to increase their involvement in household tasks.

Joanna, a 35-year-old mother of two and software analyst, described her husband's shift during the pandemic-induced reduction in work obligations. Being at home more not only provided him with the opportunity to see how much effort his partner was putting into maintaining the home, but his newfound flexibility also afforded him the opportunity to lessen her load and contribute more. She offered the following reflection:

> He didn't realize how much I was doing until he started helping out and doing those things, and he's like, *oh my gosh*. Before, with his previous job, he was really working long hours and really just not available to pitch in as much. But with his new job, he has more flexibility and more time . . . He has admitted to me, 'I didn't realize how much you were doing.' So now he pitches in.

Yasmine, mother of three working as a medical administrator in a dual-earning relationship, makes the connection between increased communications and an increase in equitable divisions of labor in the home. During the pandemic, her husband's in-person auto-repair hours were reduced, and she shifted to remote work, affording them more time to be together and enhancing opportunities for communication. She said the following:

> Because we have more time to work things out, our communication has gotten a lot better. And my husband has, I guess, grown. He has this willingness to change and so he's been improving a lot in his communication with me. And he's been a lot more helpful. He does the dishes, and from time to time does the cooking. With his relationship with the kids, it's gotten better. He makes an effort.

Her husband's willingness to change and contribute to household tasks further exemplified the positive impact of their increased opportunity for communication and overall relationship satisfaction. While the division of labor in the home may not have been notable for all couples, its salience was pronounced for many, particularly those whose relationship satisfaction declined, as we explore further in the subsequent sections.

Quality couple time, characterized by increased communication and engaging in leisure activities, played a crucial role in strengthening relationships. Increased communication fostered deeper emotional connections, while leisure activities promoted closeness and mutual enjoyment. For some, a balanced division of labor also facilitated greater appreciation and support between partners, ultimately contributing to an increase in overall relationship satisfaction.

4.3. Decreased Relationship Satisfaction

Eleven interviewees—eight women and three men—reported that they had become less satisfied with their relationship than before the pandemic. Their pandemic relationships were marked by becoming distant from each other due to emotional unavailability and unresolved grievances, or having more frequent and intense arguments. Like those who reported increased relationship satisfaction, the transition to remote work was a common experience among individuals in this group, their partners, or both. Together with the suspension of external social activities, these shifts presented an opportunity for couples to spend more time together at home. However, for some individuals in this group, relationships took a different turn, as tension and resentment emerged between the partners, hindering their ability to enjoy this time together.

Notably, all respondents in this group identified the unequal division of household labor between themselves and their partners as the primary cause of such negative feelings. For those in dual-earner households, whether both partners had steadily worked from home or only one partner did while the other shortly returned to the office, such an increase in household labor had become too demanding for the parent who remained primarily responsible for care work—the mother, in all cases. Unlike for those who reported an increase in satisfaction, there was no shift toward a more equitable division of labor in regard to housework, and an imbalance remained or, in many instances, was amplified. In this context, the lack of emotional or instrumental support from their spouses turned women's feelings of indifference and resignation to those of anger and resentment.

Alice, a mother of four young children and a government employee, had been working from home since the start of the pandemic. Her husband, a customer service executive for a delivery company, had also been working from home, but much shorter hours than before, as his regular on-site responsibilities, such as client meetings, were no longer taking place. Despite such a decrease in work hours, Alice's husband became only slightly more engaged in playing with his children, mostly enjoying leisure activities on his own and taking naps. On the other hand, Alice continued to carry out the bulk of domestic work, now including new tasks, such as cooking for and attending to the needs of her two older children who were taking classes online, while simultaneously working at her job from the dining table. This arrangement continued for more than nine months. During this period, she often asked him to help her with some housework, but each time he had a "very chauvinistic response, that 'I shouldn't have to do so and so.'"

Although she decided early on not to confront him about the issue because it was "probably the safest thing to do", Alice eventually become exhausted from having to juggle work and caregiving responsibilities on her own and frustrated with her husband, who continued to turn a blind eye to her challenging situation. As she noted, such feelings had undoubtedly taken a toll on their relationship:

> We bicker a lot more . . . The kids are here . . . it's tough to get things done around the house, so the house didn't look like somewhere you want to be in . . . And I see him take a nap, and I'm like, I don't get to take a nap!

Similar experiences were echoed by other dual-income couples where only one partner worked from home, including one case where the couple had equally shared household labor before the pandemic. During the first few months of the pandemic, Adam, a schoolteacher, and his wife, a meetings planner, worked from home and took care of their two teenaged children and household chores together. However, things changed when he was called to return to school and she was not called back to her workplace. Since then, for almost a year, Adam's wife had been the sole person responsible for housework and childcare during the workday for most of the time since the pandemic had begun. This was further intensified when he began to isolate himself from the rest of the family in the evenings to work on his postgraduate degree. His lack of engagement in the home, despite clear physical presence, negatively impacted the well-being of his wife and their relationship:

> My wife was still working from home, so that shifted things dramatically. She ended up picking up a lot more of the everyday—feeding the kids, making sure they got out to school, making sure that laundry was being done and stuff, because she was physically at home . . . There were real battles, never to the point where I thought we were going to get divorced or anything, but the relationship was pretty frosty . . . She dug in her feet and told me she wasn't supportive of this at all, and that I was going to have to bring them to all of their practices and all of their games.

For the remaining five respondents in traditional and neotraditional households, the lopsided division of household labor was not much of a concern prior to the pandemic. For these respondents, the mother, in all cases, had already been shouldering the bulk of the household labor and had a part-time job or no job at all, making such an arrangement possible. Yet, for them, too, as the pandemic continued, it eventually became a source of stress, tension, and exhaustion between the couple, leading to emotional distance and a lack of connection.

For instance, Beatrice, a stay-at-home mother of two small children, saw her responsibilities increase significantly, especially given her oldest child's disability and health difficulties, as well as her preschool going virtual. While she is used to singlehandedly taking care of her children, the pandemic had brought added pressure to navigate uncertainty and dangers of the pandemic, which became growingly difficult to handle when she was "the sole person for every appointment, every phone call, every health issue". On the other hand, her husband, a schoolteacher and soccer coach, had been preoccupied with his job responsibilities, which, despite physically being present and visible from each other's sight, they were not emotionally available for each other in a meaningful way. Beatrice explained as follows:

> We haven't connected at all . . . We're normally in the same sentence, or on the same page, but now we're chapters apart. I'll constantly say, 'Hey, we should probably find some time to catch up, at least say hello to each other'. But it just ends up being like, him and I are both so exhausted and stressed out by the end of the day that I don't think I bothered. I'm so stressed, this happened today, I don't feel good, like, with our daughter, [I would tell him] this happened, and I wrote all this stuff down to the doctor and I have another doctor visit, and he'll be like, 'Okay, I'm really tired', or something, and then he'll just turn on the TV and will be watching a show.

Emotional distance grew within couples when they continued to rely on the pre-pandemic division of household labor despite the increase in its volume.

4.4. Continuity in Relationship Satisfaction

The remaining twenty-four interviewees—fourteen women and ten men—reported that their relationship with their partner remained largely the same over the course of the pandemic and thus maintained their satisfaction. When asked whether and how the

relationship changed since the pandemic began, the language of stability dominated their responses: they were "the same people" and "nothing changed" between the two. For most respondents, this was because their existing routines—how they arranged their time for work and caregiving as individuals and coordinated these responsibilities as a couple—were not disrupted. Some had already had access to flexible work schedules or worked from their homes, or their children were old enough to take care of themselves. Enforced togetherness simply meant spending an extra few more hours at home on the weekends instead of traveling and attending social events outside, which did not prompt the couples to alter their established routines or the amount of time they spent together.

Since before the pandemic began, Logan, a 29-year-old father of one, has made a living by selling various items online from his home. His wife has also spent most of her time at home, taking care of their two-year-old son and occasionally helping him with his business and providing respite care services in the community. Given such an arrangement, the two pandemic-related shifts that were consequential to many couples' lives, as shown here—the transition to remote work and closure of childcare supports—did not have much of an impact on Logan and his wife's day-to-day lives. Without changes in relationship dynamics, his relatively high level of relationship satisfaction before the pandemic continued. He made the following remark:

> I really can't think of anything that was different [about the relationship] off the top of my head … [Before the pandemic] things were working, like the communication was good, relationship was good, obviously not perfect, because no one's marriage is, but nothing significant.

On the other end of the spectrum, a few respondents emphasized the continuity of their poor relationship dynamics and satisfaction. Anthony, a 47-year-old stepfather of a teenager, has mostly worked at his home, running two businesses. His girlfriend, an office administrator, also worked from home several days a week. Much like Logan and his wife, Anthony and his girlfriend did not find the pandemic to influence their day-to-day routines. Without a catalyst for change, their relationship dynamics stayed the same, though, in this case, at a dissatisfactory level. As he explained, "There wasn't really much contention, which is maybe one of the problems there. There just wasn't a whole lot of communication at all … Everything kind of stemmed from that one probably … I don't know that anything's changed from, let's say, two years ago. It sounds very similar to what it was before".

A minority of respondents in this group indeed found the existing structure of their lives to have changed during the pandemic, such as the transition to work from home. However, unlike those whose relationships improved, they did not spend the extra time brought by the pandemic on activities that strengthen their relationship; instead, they mostly spent the time alone in separate spaces in their homes.

Sam, 42-years-old, works as a financial administrator at a local church, while his wife homeschools their three children and takes care of the home front. When his work became hybrid, Sam began to enjoy his newfound freedom and comfort of working from home. Despite the increased presence at home along with their spouse, neither Sam nor his wife made deliberate attempts to use the extra time allowed to them to communicate or to engage in shared activities. Instead, they mostly spent the time alone in their own spaces within the home and occasionally watched television together, which he described as "side-by-side entertainment", rather than having "face-to-face" communication or leisure activities:

> I don't know if we grew apart, but we, by the end of the day, neither one of us wanted anybody talking to us. Just leave us, you know. [We were] lying in bed, watching TV by ourselves … let's watch something that makes us laugh. We did things together, but it wasn't like sitting there talking, it was more side-by-side entertainment.

Taken together, respondents in this group saw no change in their relationship quality or satisfaction because their couple quality time remained largely constant. When provided

with the opportunity to spend more leisure time together or communicate more, these couples did not take advantage of this newfound time and flexibility to reinvest in each other. Without the need or desire to make changes in the frequency or intensity of the interaction with one's partner, enforced togetherness did not matter for these individuals.

5. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated policies and guidelines compelled many people to stay in their homes. For many partnered parents, this emphasized the significance of time spent with their partners—a finite resource they had previously found wanting, given their various commitments, such as paid work and social responsibilities (Jacobs and Gerson 2001; Moen and Roehling 2005; Wajcman 2014). To understand the effects of this enforced togetherness on relationship satisfaction, we interviewed 78 married or cohabiting heterosexual parents with at least one child aged 18 or under living in the home. Participants were asked to look back and assess how their relationship with their partners unfolded over the course of the pandemic and how they feel about these developments.

Prior studies on the issue, most of which were conducted in the early months of the pandemic, have tended to paint a negative picture. This body of research highlighted the individual and psychological tolls of anxiety and uncertainty, and how these in turn shaped relationship dynamics (Balzarini et al. 2023; Cénat and Dalexis 2020; Vigl et al. 2022). Our study provides an update to this narrative and shows that the pandemic, in the long term, had three different outcomes on couples' relationships. In contrast with previous research, we find that the majority of the interviewees—fifty-five percent—felt that their relationship actually improved compared to before the pandemic. Only fifteen percent reported a decline in their relationship quality and satisfaction, and the remaining thirty percent said that the pandemic did not change their relationship in any significant way.

We find that the variation depended on whether and how they spent the increased amount of time at home. This was influenced by the couple's work and childcare conditions, such as remote-work and remote-schooling policies, dictating how much extra time each couple had. However, according to our respondents, the most significant factor contributing to relationship satisfaction was the mutual commitment to allocating this increased time toward shared experiences that strengthened their bond and intimacy. We identify two such endeavors among those who reported higher relationship satisfaction—an increase in intimate communication and jointly participating in leisure activities. Indeed, neither of these two is particularly costly or out of the ordinary. One might argue that these are, in fact, essential components of any well-functioning relationship. Yet, the respondents' constant emphasis on the significance of such banal activities in improving their relationships suggests just how little time they had to dedicate to them before the pandemic. The pandemic-driven enforced togetherness had finally offered an opportunity to enjoy what they have always found lacking—the time to communicate and enjoy each other's company.

On the other hand, fifteen percent of respondents saw their relationships deteriorate when surges in paid work, children's remote schooling, or both continued for an extended period. Under these circumstances, the division of household labor between the couple remained unequal despite an increase in its volume or became more unequal than before the pandemic—arrangements that ultimately took a toll on the person performing the bulk of the work and thus the couple's relationship. Lastly, the remaining thirty percent of the sample reported stability in their relationship and quality. The pandemic did not pose any significant disruptions to their pre-existing routines and arrangements; the couple did not see an opportunity to change the way they spend their time with their partners.

Taken together, our findings shed light on the significance of time as a valuable resource for couple's relationships but also point to the important role of the couple's agency in whether they are able and willing to use the time in meaningful ways. As we have shown, enforced togetherness by itself did not lead to stronger relationships; the connection existed only among those who took advantage of the opportunity it presented to invest in quality couple time. Only those couples that talked about how they effectively

managed the pandemic by talking about their changing schedules, their values, or goals believed that the unusual time spent as a couple benefitted their relationships. In this way, the pandemic was a blessing that finally allowed them to ease the stress from their busy lives of combining paid work and raising a family. With the pause in activities outside the household during the pandemic, these families had the time to focus on spending time together. Our findings also suggest, as does previous research, that effective communication is necessary for relationships that are experienced as satisfactory or high quality.

6. Conclusions

We offer the concept of enforced togetherness as a contribution to the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic. Quality couple time, characterized by increased communication and engaging in leisure activities, emerges as a key component contributing to the positive experiences of enforced togetherness. Couples not only adapted to the circumstances but actively sought opportunities for connection and growth. Looking forward, participants who increased their relationship satisfaction expressed a collective desire to carry forward the lessons learned during the pandemic. As couples embraced the newfound significance of togetherness and reevaluated their core values, they prioritized shared leisure activities and enhanced communication as cornerstones for their relationships. This led to contemplations on refining parenting approaches, realigning priorities, and embracing ongoing personal growth. However, the lingering question remains: will these earnest intentions persist in a post-pandemic world, where enforced togetherness no longer shapes their daily lives?

This study carries implications for couples seeking to enhance their relationships. While the pandemic and its associated lockdowns have concluded, the period of enforced togetherness described by our participants remains a part of their history. Yet, couples consistently seek avenues for relationship improvement even in post-pandemic times. Our respondents whose relationships improved enjoyed the benefits of more time together by communicating effectively and actively planning leisure-time activities as partners and with their children. Even without a pandemic, busy families would benefit from carving out intentional time each week to spend together. But that alone may not be enough. They might also pay attention to effectively communicating with one another and taking the time to talk about their daily needs and long-term goals as well.

Our findings are also useful to governmental policymakers and corporate managers as new workplace guidelines are created for a post-pandemic moment. We are experiencing a moment in which reorganizing the role of work in our lives is being openly discussed on the organizational and structural level. Much has been written about a transition to hybrid work modalities (Lockey 2021; Yoe 2023). While managers may want people to return to the workplace, employees often prefer to remain at home, at least part-time (Kossek et al. 2021; Neeley 2020; Waldrep et al. 2024). The hybrid workplace affords the flexibility parents desperately need, helping them feel less rushed and to focus on maintaining healthy relationships with their partners and their children. With flexible working hours, and daily commutes reduced, working parents have more time to spend with partners and children (Waldrep et al. 2024). Workplaces that give parents the flexibility to be dedicated employees and engaged family members are those that can retain skilled workers. Policies that demand workers be physically committed to a space away from their partners, families, and communities for the majority of their waking day must be reevaluated.

In this study, we identified the skills most conducive to navigating enforced togetherness effectively. Our findings reveal that couples with strong communication skills and a deliberate commitment to quality time emerged from the pandemic with improved relationships. The experiences shared by our participants underscore the nuanced dynamics of love during challenging times, emphasizing both the fragility and strength that emerged from this period of enforced togetherness. As we move beyond the pandemic, these reflections offer valuable insights into the ways in which relationships can evolve and thrive amidst

adversity, highlighting the capacity of couples to navigate challenges and find meaning in shared experiences.

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Article

"We Cannot Go There, They Cannot Come Here": Dispersed Care, Asian Indian Immigrant Families and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Rianka Roy [1,*], Bandana Purkayastha [2] and Elizabeth Chacko [3]

[1] Department of Sociology, Wake Forest University, Winston Salem, NC 27109, USA
[2] Department of Sociology, University of Connecticut, Manchester Hall, Storrs, CT 06269, USA; bandana.purkayastha@uconn.edu
[3] Department of Geography, George Washington University, Washington, DC 20052, USA; echacko@gwu.edu
* Correspondence: royr@wfu.edu

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted families and displaced individuals. For migrant workers, these disruptions and displacements exacerbated the state-imposed constraints on family formation. But how did high-skilled and high-wage immigrants, presumably immune from these challenges, provide care to and receive care from families during the pandemic? Based on 33 in-depth interviews with high-skilled Asian Indian immigrants in the USA during the pandemic, we note disruptions in their care to and from families. These disruptions reveal a persistent pattern of dispersion in immigrant families which leads to what we call "dispersed care." By "dispersed care" we identify the effects of various state-imposed immigration laws and policies, which force immigrants to divide and allocate care among multiple fragments of their families in home and host countries. Dispersed care affects immigrant workers' professional output, forcing them to make difficult choices between their career and care commitments. To unsettle the assumed homogeneity of high-skilled "Asian Indians," we choose participants at diverse intersections of their migration pathways—naturalized US citizens, permanent US residents, and temporary visa holders or nonimmigrants. While naturalized US citizens and permanent residents have better resources to maintain transnational family ties than nonimmigrants, all of them face the intersectional challenges of dispersed care.

Keywords: dispersed care; high-skilled migrants; nonimmigrants; transnational care; gendered care; COVID-19; intersectionality; Asian Indian immigrants

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1. Introduction

> *We haven't seen our parents since 2019 October. Long time. They are old, they need our help. We used to visit them almost twice or at least once a year before COVID. We cannot travel. There are lots of restrictions on immigrants, not on Green Card holders though, but for the other immigrants. Recently, the borders have opened, the flights are operating. But before that, there was a time when we wanted to travel, but unfortunately, we could not. First, you don't get to fly. Then you are either on H1 or L1 visa. So, if you leave the US, you may not be allowed to come back to the US. That was the biggest problem. You go there once and get stuck there forever. We have friends, who had stamping issues. They had to get their visa stamped, going back to India and come back. They could not get it because all the USCIS offices were closed. They were not getting any dates [for visa appointments]. Nothing was available, so taking care of family back home till date is a big problem. We cannot go there; they cannot come here as well. . . The only help for taking care of my daughter will be a daycare, which I don't think in this crisis will work out. It's not a good idea.*

Anumita, a banker on an L-2 visa living in New Jersey with her husband and daughter, explained some of the complications about caring for parents who are in India, along with

balancing childcare logistics during the COVID-19 pandemic. A "high-skilled" migrant, her situation encapsulated the long-term impact of immigration laws on immigrant families, along with the realities of balancing paid work and care responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The US immigration laws are now seemingly race-neutral and are built around the principle of family reunification. However, Anumita's experience shows that even for high-skilled immigrants, some additional, less visible challenges impede family members' wish to be together. Caring from thousands of miles away is already difficult under the best of circumstances, but as parents age, as nuclear families grow with the arrival of children, and as acute and/or chronic health issues develop, these distances become additional, almost insurmountable challenges, often more than what WhatsApp and Zoom calls can handle.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant spatial displacements of individuals and families across the globe. Many people were forced to readjust the locations of their paid work and family/care work obligations. The restrictions on mobility especially affected migrants[1] who either remained stuck in their home or work locations (Chacko et al. 2023; Purkayastha and Roy 2023) or were forced to move or were deported (e.g., MPI 2021). How did these disruptions shape migrants' care for their family members, and how did they receive care? Equally important, what do the pandemic conditions reveal about the intersectional nature of care in immigrant families?

Using the pandemic period as a lens, we discuss these topics with reference to migrants whom the US Government recognizes as "high-skilled." This group remains both understudied and mostly absent from political or media discourse about migrants (for some exceptions, see Banerjee 2022; Chakravorty et al. 2017; Jacobs 2020; Purkayastha 2005; Roy 2022). Among these high-skilled immigrants, we chose Asian Indians, who, in the US, represent arguably the most privileged community[2] and are most apt to be labeled a "model minority" by the media. However, as earlier studies have shown, immigration laws have persistently prevented this group from forming the types of families they sought, including with their parents and siblings (Lee et al. 2015; Purkayastha 2002). To unsettle this group's assumed homogeneity, we also choose high-skilled Asian Indian immigrants in three separate migration categories—naturalized US citizens, permanent US residents or Green-Card holders, and "nonimmigrants" or temporary immigrants on visas like H-1B, L-1, J-1 and F1-OPT.

On paper, the two main streams of migration allowed for this group are (1) migration for work, which brings high-skilled workers on a temporary basis with short-term visas, several of which are renewable, and (2) family reunification, where primary immigrants are allowed to bring their dependent spouses and non-adult children with them. This enforces the nuclear family structure on immigrant families (Schneider 2000). Family reunification also allows primary immigrants to bring over parents and siblings *only* when they naturalize as citizens. In reality, the wait for primary migrants to acquire more permanent status, and then to sponsor parents or siblings (only), who are in turn placed in even longer queues, translates to decades of family separation. Within a structural context where non-white migrants are criminalized and viewed as a threat to national security, the system of family reunification does not adequately mitigate the harsh realities of family separation (Kibria 2020).

Since they largely remain separated from their families, these immigrants have sought to bridge distances through frequent travel to home countries (e.g., Purkayastha 2005) and the use of rapidly improving technology to organize transnational care for family members (Chacko et al. 2023). These privileged immigrants are assumed to encounter few or no challenges in maintaining transnational connections with their family members. Many migrants who can afford to travel frequently simply normalize this travel as part of life. Yet, a closer look of this group reveals significant complexities related to economic affluence, skills, and the ability to maintain geographically dispersed family connections in a racialized context (Banerjee 2022).

Over the last three decades, discussions on transnational families (e.g., Levitt 2001; Baldassar 2007; Glick-Schiller et al. 1992) emphasized migrants' attempts to maintain connections and deep ties with their homeland. We partly draw on this version of transnationalism, but we situate our discussion in the context of intersecting race/gender/class structures that disperse families geographically (Kibria et al. 2014; Purkayastha 2005). Our intersectional approach draws on many decades of scholarly discussions about families that are negatively affected by draconian, dehumanizing laws and policies, including the phenomenon of forcibly split families (e.g., Dill 1994; Espiritu 1997; Pargas 2009; Taylor 2002). We study how similar laws and policies lead to state-imposed dispersion of even high-skilled but racialized immigrant families, which, in turn, affects the practices of giving and receiving care.

High-skilled immigrants choose to leave their families and come to the USA, where they attempt to build nuclear families under the USA's family reunification policies. However, our data consistently show that these migrants do not opt for the conditions which disperse their non-nuclear families, prolong their family's separation, and induce stress and anxiety about the expectations of providing care to and receiving from family members. This means that the separation or dispersion of migrant families and the disruptions in care are not necessarily caused by migrants' decisions to leave home, but by state-imposed laws and policies.

Purkayastha and Roy (2023) identify these legal and policy barriers cumulatively as "neutral enclosures", because often these barriers remain "hidden in plain sight", disguised in the rhetoric of migrants' autonomy. In this study, we identify the effects of these neutral enclosures on migrants' families, and note that one distinct outcome of neutral enclosures is "dispersed care".

By "dispersed care", we mean the practices of dividing and allocating care responsibilities among the multiple fragments of immigrant families in home and host countries amidst state-imposed barriers to reunification. Traditionally, care within the domestic contexts of reproductive labor is conceived of as a practice between cohabiting or co-located family members (Lee 2001). In immigrant families, care becomes transnational, as migrants who are able to travel to their home countries visit families to provide care, and they receive care from family members who are able to visit temporarily (Baldassar and Merla 2014; Merla 2012). But due to "neutral enclosures" (Purkayastha and Roy 2023), even seemingly privileged migrants experience prolonged separation from families, an inability to visit or reunite with family members, and are forced to disperse their care.

We highlight how the dispersion of care affects immigrant workers' professional output, upon which their "legal" status in the USA depends. Furthermore, dispersed care forces immigrants to make difficult and morally ambivalent choices between their career and care commitments. During a health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, the costs of these choices may be too high. In circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, additional restrictions on mobility make the experiences of even more-privileged immigrants resemble some aspects of families split apart because of structures of enslavement or violent and forced displacement.

We show that restrictive structures lead to "dispersed care" and shape the intersectional variations in facets such as (1) economic vulnerabilities, (2) gendered expectations of care, and (3) isolation and anxiety. All of these affect Asian Indian immigrants' expectations and their perceived ability to provide care to and receive care from their families. To capture the variations in this group, we investigate the experiences of Asian Indian nonimmigrants, permanent US residents, and naturalized citizens of the USA, as they are positioned differently within the legal and policy restrictions that are imposed by the state.

2. Literature: Locating Care in State-Imposed Dispersion of Families

2.1. High-Skilled Migrants and Nonimmigrants

The political rhetoric in the USA has constructed a rhetoric of good migrants—those whose "high skills" are to be welcome in the country—and not-so welcome immigrants,

who provide essential labor in fields, factories and service sectors but are ill paid and discursively constructed as people who are "illegal", whether or not this is actually true (Everding 2018).

The US government also creates a hierarchy between "high-skilled" and "unskilled" nonimmigrants based on the market-determined values of specific skills. Temporary "unskilled" Asian Indian migrants are brought in for jobs in sectors like agriculture and construction. Further, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) uses the term "non-immigrant" to indicate foreign nationals who are in the USA on a temporary basis for study, work, medical treatment, business, and tourism. These include B, F, L, J and H visas. Among them, H and L visas are employment-based, allowing nonimmigrants to hold temporary but full-time jobs in the USA. F and J nonimmigrant visa holders can serve as instructors and researchers in higher education institutions. While F-1, F-1 Optional Practical Training (OPT), and J-1 are not employment-based visas, we include them in our study to recognize that these visa holders are highly educated and contribute their skilled labor to US institutions. Some Asian Indians are able to transition from temporary status to permanent residency and then naturalize as US citizens. However, as we describe later in this article, this transition is lengthy for Asian Indians. During this period, some choose to migrate to other countries or return to India. Despite their high-skilled status and ostensible privileges, all three categories of immigrants of Indian origin are subjected to marginalization arising from intersecting politico-legal, socio-economic and racial structures, and restrictions on family formation. Using the case of highly skilled Indian-origin migrants, citizens, permanent residents, and temporary migrants with requisite documents, we highlight how laws and policies have controlled and curtailed possibilities of family formation and steered the formation of geographically dispersed families even for "good" and "legal" immigrants.

Indian-origin migrants in the USA include people who came to the country prior to the Asian migration ban in 1917—the Asiatic Barred Zone Act—or after 1965, when these bans were lifted. However, only a select number of highly skilled migrants have been allowed to come to the USA since 1965. They acquired permanent residency status and citizenship by naturalization (and the next generations, by birth), but they continue to be regarded as outsiders, non-Americans, and "perpetual foreigners" by swaths of the American population (Huynh et al. 2011; Tuan 1998). Hence, we use the term migrants and immigrants to refer even to long-term residents and naturalized Asian Indians. In addition, our data later show that the effects of family separation and the constraints of dispersed care are felt even when Asian Indians acquire permanent status in the US. High-skilled nonimmigrant workers have been brought over on temporary visas to work in particular industries such as technology, healthcare, scientific research.

The H-1B visa, for example, is a high-skilled but temporary and renewable visa which was introduced in the 1990 Immigration Act. Since then, Asian Indian immigrants have held the highest number of H-1B visas, which are distributed annually among high-wage and high-skilled workers in tech companies, academic and research institutions, healthcare industries and other high-wage sectors (USCIS 2023a). Other Indian migrants do not meet these high-skill categories, but on average, the earnings and positionality of the relatively affluent Indian-origin people shape the racialized discourse about them as a "model minority", even though they are socially marginal (see Dhingra 2012).

The renewal of temporary visas depends on conditions beyond the workers' control, such as labor market needs, employers' approval, and diplomatic relations between the sending and receiving countries. For migrants with a temporary status, the primary visa holders are required to remain employed and employable (i.e., appropriately equipped with skills), barring some short-term concessions between jobs. These stringent conditions of their legal status make nonimmigrant workers especially vulnerable during periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when jobs were scarce and unemployment shot up globally.

Inspired by the Civil Rights movement, the Immigration and Nationality Act (or Hart-Celler Act) of 1965 created the family reunification system, adopted a race-neutral approach, and emphasized the importance of equality and skills to allow immigrant access. This new turn in US immigration, including family reunification, seemed to reverse the injustices of the early prohibitions on racialized immigrants' family formation (e.g., the Page Law, which prohibited the entry of Chinese women and disrupted Chinese male immigrant workers' ability to form families in the US; see Kibria et al. 2014). But scholars have pointed out how the very framing of "worthiness" to enter the US since 1965 implicitly perpetuates the racialization of immigrants and has racialized outcomes (Keyes 2014; Kibria et al. 2014).

Since 1965, the family reunification system has allowed only the primary migrant to come and settle in the US, and then they may sponsor their spouse and children. The more recent temporary and employment-based visas like L1 and H-1B allow nonimmigrants to bring only their spouse and non-adult children as "dependents". However, the US immigration laws narrowly define families, excluding even parents. These family members (even adult children) are not eligible for the dependency programs. They can, however, be sponsored under family reunification, but not while the primary immigrants occupy a temporary status.

Schneider (2000) reviews US Congressional debates about immigration to find that primary immigrants are brought in primarily to fulfill US labor market needs. While they are allowed to bring dependent family members, when they are able to reunite is governed by additional sets of rules which might result in years of delays. The sponsorship of these families is expected to conform to a nuclear family structures and US family values. However, following the cultural and gendered norms of care in the countries of their origin, many migrants are expected to care for family members beyond the nuclear structure. Parents, siblings, grandparents, adult children, and other relatives are counted as close family members in various immigrant communities coming from the Global South, including Asian Indians. This means that these migrants have to figure out other ways to provide care to, or receive care from, dispersed units of their families that remain separated by state-imposed laws and policies.

In addition, while the dependency program seems to protect at least the nuclear family structure, strict barriers severely constrain "dependent" family members' economic prospects in the USA (Bhatt 2018). Female migrants mostly bear the brunt of these restrictions, either with limited employment opportunities or with added responsibilities of care work, or both (Purkayastha 2004). This exacerbates the economic burden of primary migrants as well as their entire families.

The provision of care across continents suggests that migrants need to be financially able to navigate the geographic distances and bureaucratic barriers. However, primary migrants' legal status in the USA is dependent on their professional accomplishments. This adds to the career/family responsibility challenges. In cases of primary visa holders' job losses, or even deaths, dependent family members immediately lose their right to employment (Banerjee 2022). In sum, the dispersed care in migrant families remains a reality for all of these groups, since the state-imposed laws and policies generally discourage or delay the formation of families beyond the restricted nuclear heterosexual husband-wife pairing and their non-adult children.

Another seemingly race-neutral condition has racialized outcomes, as it affects mostly Asian Indian and Chinese immigrants in high-skilled immigration categories (Bier 2023).[3] The 1965 and then the 1990 immigration reforms have brought thousands of Asian Indians and Chinese immigrants to the USA for high-skilled jobs. However, due to the 7% annual country cap on Lawful Permanent Residency or Green Cards, less than 10,000 Green Cards are issued to applicants from each country. Every year, the number of Asian Indian and Chinese applicants in the Green Card backlog continues to grow. Most Asian Indian and Chinese applicants who come to the USA with employment-based visas take close to or more than a decade to receive their Green Cards. The multiple cycles of visa renewal without assured or expedited access to permanent residency hold even high-skilled nonim-

migrant workers in a decades-long temporary status (Roy 2022). Until then, restrictions on travel and bringing family members prolong the agony of dispersed care for Asian Indian and Chinese immigrants, all under seemingly race-neutral laws and policies of immigration (see Purkayastha and Roy 2023).

Permanent residency and citizenship eliminate several of these barriers. Therefore, Asian Indians as nonimmigrants, and Asian Indians as permanent residents or US citizens might be expected to have different experiences of family and care work during the pandemic. Yet, as we describe later, both groups faced challenges related to the separation of families and consequently dispersed care because of state-imposed laws and policies. Even the primary document holders, such as employment-based visa holders and naturalized citizens who can "sponsor" the arrival of family members, need to establish their financial ability and legal standing in the USA to ensure that their families will not be a "public burden" to the host country. Next, the tourist visa is a viable option for the family members of Asian Indian immigrants for coming to the USA, but the length of the visits is restricted to only six months in a calendar year. For immigrant families looking for long-term care from family members, or to provide care to families by bringing them to the USA, the tourist visa is *not* an ideal model.

Finally, the renewal of employment-based, educational, dependent and even tourist visas is a cumbersome process, which during the COVID-19 pandemic faced significant delays. Since the transition from nonimmigrant status to permanent residency takes a very long time (mostly over a decade) for Asian Indians, their visas need to be re-stamped and renewed several times during the transitional period. The closure of borders and various government services during the COVID-19 pandemic meant that dates for visa "stamping" were unavailable at the US embassies outside the country. Without appropriate "stamping" and renewal of their visas, nonimmigrants might lose the right to re-enter the USA, even if they were able to visit their families in India (e.g., see USCIS 2023b).

2.2. Transnational, Split and Legally Dispersed Families

International migration creates transnational families where migrants provide care to and receive care from family members across borders (Baldassar and Merla 2014; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). Much of the earlier literature on transnationalism and transnational family seemed to be built on the idea of free movement and exchange, resulting from globalization (see, e.g., Glick-Schiller et al. 1992; Hochschild 2000). Then, the racialized ethnicity literature began to draw attention to the structures of racism and gendering (especially) which perpetuated structural inequalities within the very processes of transnationalism (e.g., Abrego 2014; Kibria 2000; Purkayastha 2005). This recognition of national and global structures that channel, impede, and enable some exchanges across national borders has moved the conversation away from the assumption of free movement that underlies the earlier literature. It has oriented the discussion on transnationalism toward the constraints stemming from systemic inequalities of race and ethnicity, class, gender and even religion.

The literature on racialized immigrants has documented the draconian measures used to keep family members geographically dispersed. A significant body of literature also exist on the aspects of settler colonialism and the forcible removal of Native American children to boarding schools (e.g., Blackhawk 2023). While *none* of these studies are about high-skilled Asian Indians, they provide rich theoretical insights into the mechanisms of racialization within immigration laws and policies, even in their seemingly race-neutral forms. We place high-skilled Asian Indians in the same continuum of racialization, while recognizing that their high-skilled status and economic privilege may insulate them to some extent from overt forms of violence and family separation.

Espiritu (1997) discusses the long history of laws banning Asian migration since 1882 and instituting other policies to stop or severely restrict Asian migrants from forming families. These historical laws remained in place until 1965, when other laws were instituted to control the number of people from each country. Overall, under conditions of explicit or de facto enslavement, there is a long history of splitting families (Stack 1974), which

represents one of the dominant carceral mechanisms by which settler and racist states maintain their authority over minoritized populations and extract their labor.

Alongside these studies, this body of literature highlights the unique strategies that minoritized populations, including immigrants, developed to build families. For example, Dill (1994) documents how Africans who were forcibly uprooted from their native lands and enslaved in the USA, Chinese and Indian immigrant labor brought to the USA and denied political status, along with Mexican people whose lands were colonized and annexed, all developed fictive kin, claimed paper sons and developed *compadrazgo* (creating extended family forms).

Among the more recent studies on immigrant families, Banerjee (2022) focuses on high-skilled Asian Indian nonimmigrants. She notes the use of a "transcultural cultivation" style of parenting in these families, where nonimmigrant parents instill the values and cultures of their home country among their children by engaging the children in India- and US-centric bicultural activities, and encouraging them to spend time with their extended families. However, Banerjee (2022) notes that such parenting techniques are "visa-regimented" (218), meaning migrants' ability to expose their children to their extended family networks is restricted by racialized immigration laws and policies even in high-skilled and affluent families, which supposedly have ample resources to maintain seamless transnational family connections.

Echoing these observations, we emphasize that the immigration laws and family reunification restrictions and delays not only force Asian Indian migrants to live in geographically dispersed families, but also develop strategies to disperse their care. Unlike European-origin migrants who do not encounter similar sets of laws governing their preferred family formation, the racist classification of countries and controls on total numbers of migration from the Global South leads to the persistence of these controls that have become so normalized that neither the media nor politicians talk about these controls in their discourse about high-skilled migrants. Thus, analyzing these connections through an intersectional lens, we adopt the term "dispersed care" to make the racist outcomes of seemingly race-neutral laws explicit. However, we remain cognizant of the distinction with the families of enslaved or forcibly dispersed groups that Dill (1994), Stack (1974), Taylor (2002) and others have described.

Class privilege, typically among citizens and permanent residents, enables relatively well-off migrants to access current technologies and maintain transnational connections and networks by moving back and forth to spend time with and provide care to their dispersed families. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these movements were disrupted. However, our study shows that for racialized immigrants with dispersed families, the disruptions were not temporary or only limited to the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, a range of other laws and policies in the USA and India determine which Indian origin migrants can travel more freely between the two countries and under what conditions (Agarwala 2022). As we mentioned in the previous section, the period of the COVID-19 pandemic made visible the otherwise permanent barriers or "neutral enclosures" (Purkayastha and Roy 2023) that would disperse families. Therefore, we argue that while studying racialized immigrants, even the highly skilled, the framework of transnational families does not sufficiently highlight the structural barriers. Instead, a focus on families dispersed by state-imposed laws and policies and the consequent dispersion of care may reveal deeper structural conditions which shape the bureaucracies of migration and split non-white immigrant families.

2.3. State-Imposed Dispersion of Families and Effects on Care

Migrants' imbrications in care regimes vary by intersecting gender, socio-economic class, age, ethnicity, and stage in life, and migration cycles. Caring within families divided by international borders is driven by bonds of affection, filial responsibilities, and a desire for collective welfare, but comes with financial and emotional costs, as elder and childcare is performed from afar (Baldassar 2007; Miyawaki and Hooyman 2023). Transnational

care performed in the USA incurs a significant cost and causes upheavals related to the acquisition of 180-day tourist visas for repeated travel for caregiving purposes (Murti 2006).

Caregiving is often gendered within these families (Ahlin and Sen 2020; Dallemagne 2018; Plaza 2000). "Transnational grandparents" may be guardians and caretakers for the children of their adult offspring who are working or settled abroad (Da 2003) and may even become the primary caregivers in migrant families (Chiu and Ho 2020). "Transnational grannies" (Plaza 2000) are more likely to be caregivers than grandfathers, which sets up an intersectional (gender/age) status change, since women's care work is more sought after in these latter stages of life (see Murti 2006). Care receiving can also be gendered. For example, in Sudan, transnational care provided by male relatives living abroad is embedded in social protection arrangements and focuses on girls and women due to gendered norms in that country (Mingot 2020).

Global gender norms and attitudes continue to characterize women as nurturing and natural caregivers, while men are portrayed as breadwinners, leading to an inequitable division of paid and unpaid labor within households (Pearse and Connell 2016). Several studies have investigated whether the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a recalibration of gender norms and a more equitable division of labor within households, or whether it compounded existing inequalities, especially in the realm of domestic work. Most studies indicated that in general, the COVID-19 pandemic increased women's burdens in childcare and homeschooling, eldercare, and various domestic tasks (Petts et al. 2021; Ruppanner et al. 2021).

A nationwide study in Australia found that unpaid labor in dual-career households increased for both men and women during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that the increases were much greater for women even though men took on more childcare duties than usual (Craig and Churchill 2021). A comparative study of gender role behaviors during the pandemic in Pakistan and among Pakistani immigrants living in Germany noted that male partners were more likely to take on "feminine" chores if both partners were employed outside the home and each had at least 11 years of schooling. However, within the group, even the males who performed tasks that were considered feminine were reluctant to assume caregiving roles (Tahir et al. 2022).

However, a Japanese study showed that women spent longer hours on housework and childcare than men in their families during the COVID-19 pandemic, even after adjusting for work-related factors such as work hours, type of employment, and frequency of telecommuting (Sakuragi et al. 2022).

While the general conclusions about women's burden, as these studies indicate, remain true, when we look at families dispersed by state-imposed laws and policies, which sometimes require people to travel vast distances to provide care, these gendered dynamics become more complicated based on the migrants' intersectional social locations. After all, transnational care is not limited to members of the nuclear family. Children of migrants who are unable to join their parents in migrant destinations may be tended to by close family members, with care being mediated through communication technologies (Acadero and Yeoh 2021). Similarly, elder care was performed with the assistance of digital technologies and social media by immigrants who could not travel to the places where their parents lived. They were able to locate health care providers, medical equipment, and domestic workers through social media (Chacko et al. 2023).

3. Population, Methods, and Data

The data for this paper comprised a subset of a larger project funded by the Social Science Research Council on precarity among Asian Indian migrants in the USA and migrants within India during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, however, we focused on the experiences of Indian-origin migrants and nonimmigrant adults who are identified as "high-skilled" by the US Government. Based on this "high-skilled" status, we identified 33 (15 women and 18 men) of the 80 interviews in the larger study across the two countries. The participants were all "high-skilled" workers in various essential sectors including

higher education, science and technology, and health services, and were in their late 20s to 60s with regard to age. We used a combination of snowball and purposive sampling to interview high-skilled Asian Indians living in the states of California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia and in the District of Columbia.

We focused on Asian Indians because they are currently the second largest immigrant group in the USA after Mexicans. These foreign-born Asian Indian immigrants are highly educated, with 79 percent having at least a bachelor's degree. Overwhelmingly represented in well-paid positions, they are the highest-earning ethno-national group in the country (US Census Bureau 2019). India is also an important source of international students in US institutions of higher education, accounting for about 18 percent of all international students (IIE 2022).

In order to capture the diverse range of rights for these high-skilled migrants, we intentionally included Asian Indians in all three stages of their political integration in the US. Of our 33 participants, 17 were on temporary visas (H, L, J, F and F1-OPT); 3 were permanent residents (one acquired permanent residency a few days before the interview and spent the majority of the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic on a temporary visa); and 13 were US citizens. The distribution across these three categories was unequal, because despite their social visibility, this group was somewhat inaccessible as research subjects. All authors of this article belong to the Asian Indian community and used their personal networks to build the snowball sample. Yet, even with prior acquaintances, many potential participants refused to discuss the details of their immigration status. Therefore, our semi-structured interview questions primarily dealt with the subjects' general experiences as immigrants in the USA, encounters of racism, family formations and care responsibilities, and career challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, all participants voluntarily discussed their constraints beyond the COVID-19 context and pointed at the persistence of their challenges even in "normal" times.

Each interview in this study was conducted in English and was about an hour long; the longest continued for over 90 min and the shortest lasted for 45 min. The interviews were recorded with the participants' informed consent, and then transcribed, coded, and analyzed on NVivo. We deidentified all interview transcripts by removing participants' names, employer names, and in some cases too specific and identifiable locations.

We conducted the one-to-one interviews between April and August 2021, when COVID restrictions had somewhat relaxed worldwide and vaccines were being distributed. The remote work regime still continued, and some travel restrictions were in place. Around the same transitional period, the surge in the Delta variant in India claimed hundreds of lives. For our research participants, who had already spent the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic separated from their families in India, the new waves of COVID-19 renewed their concerns related to dispersed care for their families. Their experiences were also painful due to the disparity between the Delta surge in India and the US. Disease control was relatively better managed in the USA than in India during the Delta surge. This meant that Asian Indians in the USA had no relief from their work responsibilities but they were simultaneously worried about the rising number of deaths and hospitalization in India, and had to figure out various strategies of dispersed care that included making emergency arrangements for oxygen supply, medicines, and, in some extremely tragic but not rare cases, cremations and burials (see Ghosh 2021).

While conducting the interviews, we collected over six hundred reports on the Delta surge in India from national and local newspapers in India and the USA. We did not use the media data in this paper, but the reports, along with our own experiences as Asian Indians, allowed us to situate the interviews in the macro-contexts of COVID-19 pandemic-related uncertainties and the micro-contexts of cultural expectations of care in Asian Indian families (see Bayeck 2021).

We analyzed how existing intersectional barriers would impose limitations on "doing family", and the ways in which the constraints upon families of highly skilled migrants

affected their ability to provide or access dispersed care. We focus on the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, because, for these presumably privileged groups of immigrants, the effects of "neutral enclosures" or the seemingly neutral immigration laws and policies remain invisible in "normal" times (Purkayastha and Roy 2023). We underscore how despite being considered privileged and welcomed high-status migrants and immigrants, the hoped-for educational and work trajectories, expected financial stability and caregiving and care-receiving abilities of high-skilled Asian Indians living in the USA were compromised and impeded during the COVID-19 pandemic in expected as well as unanticipated ways.

4. Analysis

The phenomenon of family and care dispersion through state-imposed laws and policies reveals a facet of racialization that is not often emphasized in the literature. India-origin citizens and temporary migrants are subject to different rules governing their presence in the USA. However, to support/sponsor the travel of their relatives to the USA, even naturalized citizens have to maintain the "good citizen" status (that is, no negative encounters with the ever-expanding "crimimigration" system, or the conflation of immigration and criminal justice bureaucracy; see Golash-Boza 2017; Menjívar et al. 2018). For highly skilled migrants who are non-citizens, an ongoing series of reports—whether they change their residence, if they can travel and related matters—have to be provided to the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) regularly. For the nonimmigrant group, their visas are contingent upon their employers' willingness to continue their employment, a system similar to indenture, which severely constrains their lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic period intensified the restrictions that were already in place. Racist incidents against Asians and "brown foreigners" increased. Within the amplified political rhetoric against the "Asian Flu", surveillance increased on migrants as suspected carriers of the virus (Glenza 2021). While the media lauded frontline workers—which included contributions of this group—there was no recognition of their conditions of life. In addition, borders closed, as did US Consulates and processing offices, with no indication of how they were to meet reporting requirements (failing which they would fall out of status).

Centering our analysis around the structurally formed dispersed-family framework, we identified the three following themes that dominated Asian Indian immigrants' dispersed care.

4.1. Economic Vulnerabilities Shaping Dispersed Care

Temporary Asian Indian immigrants' primary concern during the pandemic was about keeping their jobs. Unlike permanent residents and citizens, high-skilled temporary immigrants were not eligible for unemployment benefits from the US government. In addition, the loss of employment would mean that they would have to leave the country where they had started to build their lives. Therefore, temporary immigrants viewed the economic hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic as intense constraints on their care work commitments, which called for complex strategies of dispersed care.

Somdip, an Assistant Professor on a H-1B visa, mentioned his concerns about his job in relation to his family's dispersion. He lives in the USA with his wife Sudakshina and their son, and their parents live in India. Right before the COVID-19 pandemic, Sudakshina had placed their infant son with her parents in India. Unable to afford childcare in the USA early in their career—on temporary visas—they had to rely on the transnational care provided by their parents. Older parents often travel to the migrant households of their adult children to provide care for their grandchildren, but on time-delimited tourist visas (Chacko et al. 2023; Murti 2006). Sudakshina's parents had already exhausted the annual quota of their US visit, and this led to their decision to engage in dispersing care, keeping their son in India temporarily. The border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted their travel plans for months, intensifying the agony of the prolonged separation of their family. This necessitated other strategies of dispersed care. Somdip and Sudakshina spent hours every day on video calls guiding their parents in taking care of their son. This had to be

balanced with their work commitments in the USA and the time difference between the two countries.

In the meantime, Somdip, who assumes the gendered responsibility as the primary male provider in his nuclear family in the USA and his parents' family in India, faced additional economic hardships. His promotion and contract renewal were due right before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the process was delayed due to low student enrollment. He was worried that if he lost his job, he would not be able to support his families in India and the USA, and would even have to uproot his nuclear family unit and return to India. Here, it is worth noting that the gendered "male provider" role in migrant families becomes a substitute for care toward dispersed families. This follows the same understanding of migrant remittances as one form of care, which helps migrants to reduce their guilt for not providing physical care to their families (Lee et al. 2015; Merla 2012). Somdip said:

> *My job is solely dependent on graduate and undergraduate enrollment. I'm a teaching faculty. So if there is no enrollment, anything can happen. . . In the US, we were having declining numbers of students, international students in our graduate program. So the graduate class sizes were extremely small, because most of the chemistry graduate students are international students, and they were not ready to come to the US because of the Trump administration's policies and all those very, very harsh immigration policies. And I remember, I finally asked [the Department Chair] that "Do I need to worry at all because I have a family, I have a son, I have a wife." . . .And then I said that as an international worker, on H-1B visa, I cannot just afford not being paid for a term and rejoin next year, because my H-1B does require me to stay employed every day. So he understood that. But that was a situation where no conclusion was made. . . I assume[d] the worst, that probably this could happen, that I could even get unemployed.*

This excerpt highlights how longer-term political arrangements, directed at even high-income nonimmigrants from the Global South, contributed to Somdip's economic vulnerability and destabilized his role as a provider/caregiver.

For all Asian Indian nonimmigrants who supported their families back in India, concerns about their dispersed families and dispersed care commitments and their own economic survival remained entangled. Sourav, a postdoctoral researcher on a J-1 visa and a single person, viewed himself in the expected gendered position of a male provider for two households—his own in the USA, and his parents in India. In the excerpt below, he puts these families in two separate frames. His parents' family in India was expected to receive his care, but when he talks about his "family" in the USA, his focus transitions to his professional output. His perceived economic failures worsened his concerns about his inability to care for his parents.

> *Let's break this down into two parts-- India and United States. People like us have this-- two families. One is by myself. And the other one is with my parents. And it's probably worth mentioning that I'm the only earning member in both the families, my dad is retired, my mom has always been a housewife. So they basically live off what I am able to provide them. So there is this added stress that if I don't have a job, then not only I will not survive, but two other people who will also not survive. So now. . .[with] COVID in India, . . . my dad is 68. And my mom is 57. And I am hoping that they will go through this phase. . . .So that does contribute to a lot of mental stress, which prevents me from focusing here. Now let's talk about me being here. I've been stuck in this apartment for the last year. I don't go out, I don't see my students, I barely go anywhere. I don't see my research mentor. And so the work has been slow. . . So basically, it's like an inverted cone. And all I'm seeing is I am getting through the cone and trying to get into the bottom of the cone. And on top of that, I think the inside of the cone is very oily, and I cannot hold on to something to maintain my position. Each day I feel that I'm getting a little more down. But I don't know where the bottom is.*

The impact of the legal barriers on mobility is evident in Sourav's account of dispersed families and dispersed care between India and the USA. What he also demonstrates in the above comment—especially in his evocative metaphor of being stuck in an "oily cone"—is how dispersed care affects his productivity as a "high-skilled" immigrant. This is doubly concerning for him because his legal status in the USA depends on his professional success and accomplishments that need to be made within a specific number of years. The fact that Sourav's anxiety about care for his parents in India and his well-being in the USA slows down his work reveals how dispersed care exacerbates immigrants' precarity.

For these immigrants, parents are part of the core family, and caring for them is a cultural and ethical norm. Importantly, the structures of government-managed support (e.g., social security in the USA) are not the same in India, and neither are retirement ages. This suggests that immigrants have to constantly pay heed to the differing age-based structural positioning of dispersed family members. The visa restrictions and border closures splitting the families of nonimmigrants also interfered with such care work obligations.

We reemphasize a point that we raised earlier: for Somdip, Sourav, and their families, the complexities of dispersed care caused by these immigrants' seemingly race-neutral and skill-based temporary migration status could persist for almost a decade, if not more. The country-of-birth based limits on Green Cards delays the permanent residency and naturalized citizenship of Asian Indians (see discussion on Green-Card backlogs in the literature). This also shows how seemingly race-neutral immigration laws and policies have racialized outcomes.

However, concerns about dispersed care and its relation to economic vulnerabilities dominated the accounts of Asian Indian permanent residents and naturalized US citizens as well. While job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic would not lead to their deportation, these migrants were worried about missing opportunities to provide care, and the possible strategies of dispersed care. This was closely woven with their worries about keeping their jobs. Most high-skilled long-term migrants had the financial resources to travel regularly to India and had the expectation that they would be able to do so once or twice a year. The adult children in these dispersed families tried their best to provide care for their elderly parents in India from the USA. Modern communication technologies helped them partly to keep in regular contact with their parents and check on their wellbeing, but forced immobility prevented them from providing care in person even for a few days or weeks at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For example, Anjali, a naturalized citizen, is a graphic designer who lives in California with her husband Ronnie (also a naturalized citizen) and their two high-school age children. Ronnie, a computer scientist and a US citizen, was involved in a start-up that did not get off the ground due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic, Anjali was furloughed, resulting in the loss of both incomes in a dual-career household. Adding to their financial problems were the struggles of providing transnational dispersed care to Anjali's ailing in-laws and the guilt, frustration and worry that this engendered:

> *We usually had WhatsApp video calls to check in on my in-laws [who live in India] every day from May [2020]. In October my father-in-law had a fall. After that he was using a walker. But it took a hit on both of them. All these seniors are on so many medicines. cholesterol, BP, etc. And no children are around to help and make sure the medications are right or taken at the right time. Then we found out after talking to doctors that the meds were not right. We had to get him off the cholesterol meds. Lockdown made them [the in-laws] feel very insecure and there were also psychological issues. The geriatric specialist doc took Amma off all the medication. Papa was on four BP medicines, plus he has Parkinson's disease. We worry about Ronnie's parents all the time. Papa has senior depression. We keep calling and WhatsApping to see how they are doing, how they are feeling, to make sure they know that we care about them and love them. But it would have been so much better if we could be there, or they were here.*

Since our sample included highly skilled people who did not earn much money (students and postdocs) as well as middle class or relatively affluent people, the economic

problems unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic revealed different intensities of economic vulnerability, and drew dispersed family members into the context of vulnerability in different ways. But *all* migrants shared a longer-term explicit or implicit concern about health crises of distant family members, especially parents, and whether they could get there to help arrange or provide care in a timely manner. Taking time off from work to travel this long distance, and the physical and economic toll of these journeys, never fits the US Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)-type assumptions about the time required for family care. The COVID-19 pandemic also unleashed additional burdens through prohibitions against travel.

4.2. Gendered Expectations of Dispersed Care

A long tradition of feminist scholarship has discussed the gendered hierarchies of paid and care work distributed across overlapping public and private spheres. New spatial configurations appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic, as paid work (for many occupations) was carried out from homes, where the spaces had been organized primarily for non-paid work lives. New forms of remote work were institutionalized based on a series of technologies which offered ease of work but also possibilities for the surveillance of digital traces left behind by workers (Cannito and Scavarda 2020; Fan and Moen 2021).

Of course, frontline workers continued to go to their workspaces amidst growing vulnerability to COVID-19. Some industries started the implementation of working from home, turning domestic spaces into sites of waged work overnight, resulting in the overlapping and blurring of spaces of paid employment, domestic work, and care. This affected mostly women, who were expected to provide care work to their families here and fulfil professional responsibilities, all at the same time and in the same place.

For Asian Indian immigrant families in the USA, similar gendered expectations and experiences of dispersed care were visible even among high-skilled women in partnered situations and dual-career households. In addition, the involvement of various public institutions, laws and policies in immigrant family formations continued to blur the distinction between the public realms of paid work and the private realms of care. As a result, dispersed care cannot be seen as an exclusively private phenomenon.

At the beginning of this article, we shared Anumita's experience of having to juggle her remote work and childcare responsibilities. Being on an L-1 visa, she could neither frequently visit her family in India nor pursue family reunification for her parents until she was a US citizen. As an Asian Indian facing the seemingly race-neutral yet deeply racialized Green Card backlog (see discussion in the literature section), she will probably take almost a decade to obtain naturalized citizenship. Until then, she will constantly have to figure out the complicated arrangement of dispersed care.

But even as a naturalized citizen, Karuna, a woman professor living in New Jersey, reported experiencing chronic caregiver stress. She had to abruptly adopt the role of primary caregiver for her mother-in-law in addition to her caregiving responsibilities for her young daughters and her husband:

> *With the pandemic unfurling, my mother-in-law who lived next door moved to our house during the lockdown [March 2020] for two weeks because she has pre-existing conditions. She used to have home health aides, but we wanted to minimize the uncertainty of care and risk of infection. My office was converted into her bedroom—it was supposed to be only for 2 weeks. But she actually didn't move out until March 2021. It was very stressful as I had no quiet space to work without interruptions. I was juggling housework, helping my daughters transition to online learning and keeping them entertained and occupied, teaching, doing my research and administrative responsibilities as Director and taking care of my mother-in-law. She had to be monitored closely and had blood work done twice a week. She needed help with bathing and getting dressed. I would work late into the night when things had quietened down just to get my work completed. I hardly got any sleep and felt tired all the time. I was in a state of constant stress.*

Families that were used to receiving support from grandparents for childcare (Murti 2006) found that either these grandparents were stuck in the USA, in danger of overstaying their tourist visas, which would affect their ability to get visas in other cycles, or they could not come at all. With consulate closures, the waiting time for interviews for tourist visas has now extended to a two-year wait in India, further compounding the structural barriers to grandparent care provision within families dispersed by state-imposed laws and policies.

In some situations where the female partner had to work outside the home while the male partner could complete remote work, traditional gender roles were *temporarily* reversed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was the case of Shalini, a US citizen and a nurse practitioner with two small children, who worked long hours in a Psych unit. Shalini's husband is an IT technical analyst whose work could be completed remotely, and he took on the duties of childcare as Shalini had to work outside the home and daycare was not available during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *It is a nightmare to have your parent as your teacher, your parent as your playmate, your parent as your lunch lady. It was stressful for them [the kids] and for us [the parents]. Because my son is 5, he was in kindergarten, and he could not be left by himself. My husband had to keep him in his room as he worked. Luckily, my husband is in IT and could work entirely from home.*

Some of our previous examples show how male immigrants viewed themselves in the gendered role of a male provider as well as a caregiver for their families in the USA and in India. Similarly, blurring the gendered dichotomy of paid work and dispersed care, high-skilled Indian women immigrants remained conflicted about their desire to care for families, receiving care from their families, and their newfound independence in the host country. Therefore, we note that the obligation of dispersed care is not confined to heteronormative family structures, and is often a burden for single people, too. For example, Rajni, an advanced doctoral student on a nonimmigrant visa, reflected how she cherished her independence as a woman in the USA, but missed the sense of belonging because her family was in India. Seen through the lens of dispersed care, Rajni's experience reveals the ambivalent nature of women immigrants' autonomy that they acquire through migration (see Bastia 2012):

> *Everyone is kind of sort of equal [in the US], which I think is very good. One bad thing of course, is... you have to be fiercely independent here. In India, you have a support system, if your family is there you belong there.*

Some single women felt they had to go to India to care for their parents because their married siblings were tied up with caring for members of their nuclear families. Sudha was one such person who went to India and was then stuck amidst the lockdown. Although a US citizen, she faced the constraints of dispersed care as she juggled working remotely from India, staying up late so that her work hours corresponded to the workday on the east coast of the USA, all while taking care of her ailing mother.

Our interviews revealed that women, in general, were expected to provide care; many were forced to strategically expand the provision of dispersed care as schools and health aids became unavailable. They also provided emotional care and detailed care oversight through calls to providers. For single persons, care was interpreted as providing economic support. Provision of economic support was implicit among men in heterosexual unions. However, within the structures and expectations of dispersed care, the premise of who can more easily traverse the distance to India, unburdened by responsibilities of younger children, puts the onus on men to take up some of the distant care-related tasks. Connell (2005) and others' studies of hegemonic masculinities discussed the power that comes with being in the upper echelons of white-collar occupations; this applies to many Asian Indian origin men in this group. Yet the reality of families dispersed by state-imposed laws places some dispersed care-work responsibility on them in ways that are qualitatively different from their US-born or EU-origin counterparts in the same social locations. In addition, most minoritized families in the USA developed networks of Dill's (1994) fictive kin and

compadrazgo for their survival in the host country, a fact that is so normalized that it is rarely marked in terms of the structures that affect this group. The COVID-19 pandemic made these structures visible again and enhanced these subjects' anxiety about dispersed care.

4.3. Isolation and Anxiety within the Context of Dispersed Care

Our research participants across all three categories of political integration into US society (i.e., nonimmigrants, permanent residents, and US citizens) faced isolation and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. While these experiences were more directly related to concerns of self-care, we note that for immigrants, self-care was related to their perceptions of being productive workers, so that they could fulfill their dispersed care responsibilities toward their families. In addition, these experiences of isolation and anxiety stand out as outcomes of immigrants' inability to receive care from their family members, who remained dispersed due to state-imposed laws and policies.

The government-mandated quarantine, social distancing and lockdowns required individuals and families to cease or limit their physical interactions with persons who were not in their household during the COVID-19 pandemic. This led to feelings of loneliness and isolation and demonstrated how the structures of dispersed care also limited immigrants' ability to receive care from their family members. These separations intersected with economic precarity and vulnerable legal status. Air travel restrictions prevented immigrants from being with supportive families in other states or countries, exacerbating their experience of isolation.

For example, Indu, a single woman in her 30s and an advanced doctoral student at a Midwestern university, narrated how the anxieties about not being able to provide care to family members worsened her feeling of isolation, especially when her institution failed to recognize this challenge for international students. In the following statement, Indu does not separate her personal well-being and the need for self-care from her care commitments towards her dispersed family. Rather, she remains stuck in the structures of dispersed care, in which she is neither able to provide care for her family nor receive care from them, and consequently experiences extreme isolation and anxiety:

> *I feel like we international students were just like, left to deal with our trauma. Pretty much it's our worst nightmare that we cannot be with our family and potentially not being able to see them. I'm pretty sure with a lot of students it has happened that they have lost anyone, someone and they have not been able to see them or. . . they have got to know that someone got extremely sick, and they still couldn't be there for them. . . all universities have done is just send these blanket emails as to like, oh, we understand these hardships and we stand by you, you know, but then you actually reach out to the Office of International students, and they're like, we'll get back to you in three to four business days. That doesn't help me.*

We expected these nonimmigrants would have sought out the connections in the diaspora community, at least on the basis of co-ethnicity. But most did not seem keen on building those connections, as they were either "new" to the USA or did not identify with the life circumstances of permanent residents and naturalized citizens. At least three women living alone on temporary visas consciously avoided the diaspora communities, which they felt were patriarchal and hostile toward single women. This exacerbated female immigrants' isolation, especially those who lived alone.

For example, Janvi, a speech therapist on an H-1B visa, lived by herself in a Midwestern city, because her husband could not obtain his employment-based visa in the USA during the COVID-19 pandemic. Janvi distanced herself from the diaspora community, even during the lonely period of the COVID-19 pandemic, because she felt that her dispersed family structure was judged through a sexist lens. Her career choice was considered an obstruction to her gendered care toward her husband, although he could not join her due to state-imposed legal barriers. She said:

> *After my marriage. . . I told you how my husband lives. He is doing his research now in Norway and I have been asked [by members of the diaspora] why I'm not with my husband. And in other words, why am I here [in the US] pursuing my career when I should be with him. They make it very subtle. But yes, I have been told these things.*

These migrants sought out care and support from their professional networks (e.g., co-workers, professors, advisors). However, accounts of racism and sexism within these professional networks explained why these migrants—especially the nonimmigrants—had few satisfactory options to deal with their isolation.

Feelings of isolation and precarity were heightened by job losses and economic uncertainties, even for those whose legal status was more secure than those on temporary visas. Sunny, a single man, is a permanent resident and was a tenured professor at a public university. However, he lost his job during the pandemic, and started experiencing panic attacks and depression. He did not share the news that he was laid off with his parents in India as he wanted to save them from worrying about him. This was a strategy of dispersed care, in which Sunny did not let his parents in India become affected by the news of his unemployment. But he was unable to receive their care, which exacerbated his struggles. Having no one at home with whom to share his thoughts and worries added to the mental health issues he experienced. He tried to alleviate the stress of forced isolation by talking to close friends who were also confidants:

> *I got laid off in May [2020]. It was a very traumatic experience. I was a tenured professor with publications, grants and a good teaching record, but I was let go because my university was going through a financial setback, and I was the most junior person in my department. I was anxious because I was stuck in the Midwest that summer without a summer teaching job and hardly any social support. I got unemployment benefits after a couple of months, but I had to dip into savings as the benefits do not cover all expenses. I had to be very careful in how I spent my money. COBRA [Health Insurance] was too expensive so I did without medical insurance and just hoped I would not get sick. I must have applied for over 60 academic jobs and 40 other kinds of jobs, but although I got a couple of interviews during the fall semester, I did not get any of the jobs. I think people are trying to hire at lower salaries and with a Ph.D. they would have to usually pay more. There were many government jobs that I could have applied for but they all needed US citizenship.*

Anxiety and isolation were also expressed by older immigrants who did not have children and relatives living close by and who resided in places where their social networks were limited. There was considerable regional variation in political and public health responses (including closure, containment and vaccination) to COVID-19 in the USA, leading to varying levels of exposure to the virus and risks of contracting the disease. For example, Anita, a permanent resident who lives in a gated housing complex in Pennsylvania with her husband, felt the weight and isolation of being a minority in a predominantly white county, town and gated community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of her white neighbors did not think that the virus was real and refused to take precautions. She could not visit her children and friends in upstate New York and found it difficult to relate to her neighbors. Anita felt vulnerable because both she and her husband had diabetes but were among a largely unvaccinated population, which made self-care more difficult. Moreover, as Pennsylvania allows the open carrying of guns without a license, she felt unable to complain as she feared repercussions and bodily harm as a visible minority:

> *We live in a community where many people don't believe that the COVID virus is real. You would see people inside stores with no masks or masks hanging off their ear or around their necks. But you don't dare say anything because they might have guns. There is a lot of misinformation about vaccination here. I have a neighbor who believes it is a government conspiracy. It is difficult to have a conversation with antivaxxers and people who are right wing, so you just stay away from them.*

Anita's example shows that alongside the racialized outcomes of seemingly race-neutral immigration laws and policies, Asian Indians—across migration categories—are likely to experience everyday racism and fear of racial violence (see also Chacko 2015; Kurien and Purkayastha 2024). Therefore, like Anita, Vijay, a tech professional on an H-1B visa, who lives alone in a white-majority town, experienced racialized fear, and recalled how he was accosted by a white person at his gym:

> *I used to go to the gym, and it was like a first come first served during COVID. They actually made places of six feet bubble. Whenever you go there you occupy a spot. So I went there and I took a spot… And there was one lady who was a suburban [white] housewife in her 30s. She came and she told me "This is my spot." I did not argue with her. I mean, I would have asked her "What do you mean by your spot?" Because this is not a university where faculty can have their own spot or something, this is just a gym, a public facility, you come and you take your spot. And she did not bother to tell me that or why she wanted that spot. It's like she felt very insecure that I was in her spot. I am going under her skin kind of thing. And she was very annoyed. I mean, that was the first time she was talking to me. Apart from that, she never talked to me. But she always talked to the other person beside me. He was also a white guy.*

With access to various material resources, our interviewees had some opportunities for self-care. Several participants mentioned using social media, reading books, and watching web series to avoid boredom and isolation. Yet, as we examine the accounts in the context of giving and receiving care, we note that both Asian Indian women and men suffered from anxiety, sense of isolation, and stress during the pandemic. The persistent fear of racism—common among racialized subjects even without overt risks of racist assaults—exacerbated their isolation (Grinshteyn et al. 2022; Selod 2018). Their racialized position made even the naturalized US citizens of Indian-origin vulnerable, but the non-immigrants suffered the most because of their greater economic-political vulnerability. Although there is a diffuse expectation that these groups could not be suffering because of their economic positionality, our study shows that the impact of state-imposed dispersion and the lack of public recognition of high-skilled immigrants' distress intersect to shape these anxieties even into trauma.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic, with restrictions on travel, based on earlier racialized classification of countries within the US immigration systems, created a set of unprecedented conditions that affected high-skilled Asian Indian migrants and disrupted their ability to provide care, or, on occasion, receive care within dispersed families. We identify the phenomenon as "dispersed care", in which seemingly race-neutral laws and policies imposed by the state led to long-term separation in immigrant families and immigrants were forced to figure out various strategies to allocate care among multiple family units and balance their care and career commitments. What was made transparent during the COVID-19 pandemic is that the additional money and time that these immigrants mobilized for dispersed care could still be placed in jeopardy during any crisis.

These racialized restrictions already existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but were somewhat invisible because so many Asian Indian migrants had just normalized the expenditure of money and time as a way of "doing family" across vast distances. With a change in these structural conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic—i.e., new restrictions on travel, consulate shutdowns which affected visa stamping and renewal, including tourist visa backlogs—existing individual-level arrangements simply fell apart.

The rhetoric of Asian Indian as a "model minority" in the media makes it appear as though the lives of these high-skilled racialized migrants were on par with their US-born white peers. For high-skilled nonimmigrants, the conditions of their restrictions never surfaced in the general understanding, even if they were frontline workers. But these restrictions cast significantly enhanced negative impacts on their lives as they attempted to deal with the enclosures that restricted their lives (Purkayastha and Roy 2023).

The provision of dispersed care is managed through visits and technology within these dispersed families. However, this pattern can only be understood if we consider the subjects' gendered—and intersectional—social locations. Families that are more stable economically are better positioned to perform dispersed care. While the typical gendered patterns of immediate care work are evident within nuclear families in the USA, for single males, and for males in heterosexual partnerships, the journeys to provide care often become their responsibility, especially if they have younger children who are left to the female spouse's care. Single immigrant women remain ambivalent about their position in the diaspora, care commitments to their families, and perceived autonomy in the host country, especially when they occupy a nonimmigrant status. Therefore, the balance of *dispersed care across geographies of dispersed families* is an important contextual factor for understanding how race/class/gender/age intersect to shape the nature of care work in migrant families.

In current migration regimes, the USA and other wealthy countries typically delink migrant labor contributions from their political rights to form families. This trend has been in place for decades but remains relatively unmarked for high-skilled migrants. Even within this group, the lack of access to political, social, economic rights and human rights is most acute for nonimmigrants. But the lack of rights of *even* naturalized citizens and permanent residents to form families, based on racist restrictions on how many people can migrate from specific parts of the world, reveals a different facet of migration bans. For racialized citizens and migrants, meaningful family contributions through care for their families are continually disrupted and dispersed by political decisions, including those made during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Notes

[1] We use the generic term migrants and immigrants to indicate racialized groups including nonimmigrants or temporary migrants, permanent residents, and citizens. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) uses the term 'nonimmigrant' to indicate foreign nationals who are in the USA on a temporary basis for study, work, medical treatment, business, and tourism. These include those on B, F, L, J and H visas. Among them, H and L visas are employment-based, allowing nonimmigrants to hold temporary but full-time jobs in the USA. F and J nonimmigrant visa-holders can serve as instructors and researchers in higher education institutions. While F-1, F-1 Optional Practical Training (OPT), and J-1 are not employment-based visas, we include them in our study to recognize that these visa holders are highly educated and contribute their skilled labor to US institutions. Some Asian Indians are able to transition from temporary status to permanent residency and then naturalize as US citizens. However, as we describe later in this article, the transition is lengthy for Asian Indians. During this period, some choose to migrate to other countries or return to India. Despite their high-skilled status and ostensible privileges, all three categories of immigrants of

Indian origin are subjected to marginalization arising from intersecting politico-legal, socio-economic and racial structures, and restrictions on family formation.

[2] With a median annual household income of US$ 132,000, Asian Indian immigrants represent the wealthiest ethnic community in the USA (US Census Bureau 2019). High-income Asian Indian households have high-skilled high-earning members who are either on H or L visas, are permanent US residents, citizens, or on F-1 and J-1 student visas. The latter nonimmigrants are expected to provide their labor in various critical roles as instructors and researchers, but, their 'non-employment' work status limits their yearly salaries to, typically, between US$ 20,000 and US$ 40,000. Various restrictions of dependency also apply to the family members of F and J visa holders. The people of Asian Indian origin in the USA include other migrants who struggle to make ends meet (Mitra 2021), but the strength of earnings of the higher income groups raises the median income. This paper focuses on the higher income groups.

[3] Mexican immigrants trying to unite with families in the USA are the most backlogged in family reunification-based Green Card applications.

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Contrasting Conceptions of Work–Family Balance and the Implications for Satisfaction with Balance during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sejin Um [1,†], Anne Kou [1,*,†], Carolyn E. Waldrep [2] and Kathleen Gerson [1]

[1] Department of Sociology, New York University, New York, NY 10012, USA; sejinum@nyu.edu (S.U.); kathleen.gerson@nyu.edu (K.G.)
[2] Department of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712, USA; kerry.waldrep@utexas.edu
* Correspondence: anne.kou@nyu.edu
† These authors contributed equally to this work.

Abstract: Pandemic-related changes, including the expansion of remote work and the closure of schools and daycare supports, posed unprecedented challenges to parents' conceptions of their work and home routines. Drawing on interviews with 88 heterosexual partnered parents, we examine the different ways parents understand what it means to balance work and family responsibilities and how their conceptions shaped satisfaction with their balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we discover that parents held three distinct conceptions of work–family balance at the outset of the pandemic: (1) individualistic (where balance is understood as an individual pursuit and regarded independently of their partner's efforts in the work and family spheres), (2) specialized (where each partner specializes in one sphere, producing balance between spheres), and (3) egalitarian (where partners share responsibilities in both spheres). Next, among the women and men who held specialized or egalitarian conceptions of balance, most sustained their level of satisfaction. In contrast, among those with individualistic conceptions, most women (but not men) reported a change in their satisfaction. These findings provide new insights about the varied meanings people attach to the concept of "work–family balance" and how these diverse conceptions have consequences for satisfaction with gender dynamics in households.

Keywords: work–family balance; work–family conflict; COVID-19; gender inequality

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1. Introduction

Parents' work and caregiving routines were among the most significant disruptions that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over a third of the U.S. labor force shifted to remote work (Dey et al. 2021) just as school and childcare facilities closed, creating a new work–family reality for many parents (Dunatchik et al. 2021; Yavorsky et al. 2021). Scholars have documented the many ways that parents responded to these changes as they endeavored to restore, improve, or maintain their work and caregiving routines as well as the consequences of these efforts for gendered patterns in the household (e.g., Calarco et al. 2020, 2021; Carlson et al. 2020a; Petts et al. 2021). Yet, the various ways people conceived of work–family balance at the outset of the pandemic and the ways these outlooks shaped their pandemic coping strategies remain unclear. To examine these processes, our study addresses two key questions: how do parents understand what it means to have work–family balance? And how satisfied are they with the strategies they deployed to achieve balance during the pandemic? We thus examine the diverse ways partnered mothers and fathers understand work–family balance and the extent to which satisfaction with their balance changed as the pandemic unfolded.

Although research across a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, management, and sociology, frequently relies on the concept of "work–family balance", the term has

remained vaguely and inconsistently defined. In addition to a lack of clarity and scholarly consensus, researchers know little about Americans' conceptions of work–family balance in their daily lives. Scholars typically assume that such balance is a property of the individual (Dumas et al. 2013; Frone 2003; Guillaume and Pochic 2009; Nippert-Eng 2008), but research examining how individuals and couples conceive of balance is scant. This oversight not only limits a clear understanding of how parents and workers imagine and achieve balance; it also overlooks the potential consequences of diverse views for the gender dynamics in heterosexual, two-parent households.

As the COVID-19 pandemic upended people's established work and caregiving routines, parents and workers faced a unique opportunity to reassess how they arranged work and family responsibilities, what form they believed the balance between the two should take, and what—if anything—they expected from their partners. Using 88 in-depth interviews with married or cohabiting parents from a larger pool of a nationally representative sample of adults with caregiving responsibilities, we found that parents articulated three distinct conceptions of work–family balance, which we label "individualistic", "specialized", and "egalitarian". An individualistic conception, which most resonates with popular understandings, defines balance as a state of being that one pursues individually and establishes independent of a partner's actions. On the other hand, many mothers and fathers conceived of work–family balance as a collective achievement. We found two versions of this couple-centric conception. In one, each partner specializes in one sphere, thus producing a balance between the spheres but not in the lives of individual mothers and fathers. In the other, balance consists of relatively equal contributions by both partners to both spheres.

Interviews also revealed that mothers but not fathers with individualistic conceptions of balance were more likely than others to experience a change in their ideas about how balance could and should be achieved, reporting either a decline or an improvement in their satisfaction with the balance in their lives. In contrast, those who conceived of balance in either specialized or egalitarian terms were less likely to experience a change in either their level of satisfaction or their conception of balance. Across all three groups, however, notable gender differences emerge—with women more likely than men to experience a change in their satisfaction with work–family balance.

These findings contribute to the literature on gender inequality and the work–family interface in several ways. By identifying and examining the diversity of conceptions among American parents—as distinct from scholarly conceptualizations of work–family balance—we clarify the various meanings people impart to an often used but rarely specified concept. We focus, then, on how ordinary people conceive of work–family balance in their daily lives, rather than how scholars and researchers conceptualize the term. Moreover, by showing how the pandemic prompted more scrutiny and revision of individualistic conceptions than of the other conceptions, we gain insight into how an individualistic definition has contributed to higher levels of work–family conflict for employed women. The relative lack of revision in men's conceptions—regardless of their partner's work status—also helps us understand why change in men's domestic participation has been more sluggish (England 2010).

1.1. Gender Inequality in Work and Family before and during the Pandemic

Scholars have identified how a myriad of cultural, organizational, and institutional factors contribute to gender inequalities in families' dual responsibilities for earning income and caring for children and the home. Hays (1996) highlights the norms of "intensive mothering", which prescribe that mothers should be constantly available and involved in their children's lives. Even away from their children, mothers engage in ongoing cognitive labor for their families (Daminger 2019). This time-intensive approach to mothering applies to mothers who work outside the home as well, requiring them to engage in a "second shift" of childcare and household labor after working (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Bianchi et al. 2012). Women prioritize time spent caring for their children (Bianchi and Milkie 2010; Pepin et al. 2018), even as mothers are increasingly responsible for their children financially (Glass et al. 2021). Yet, in the workplace, workers are expected to prioritize their

career responsibilities, conflicting with mothers' expected devotion to family (Blair-Loy 2003; Gerson 2010; Williams 2000, 2010). As a result, women scale back on their career ambitions or leave the workforce, especially when inflexible work environments are incompatible with their obligations in the home (Kelly and Moen 2020; Williams et al. 2012).

In response to gender inequality within the family, some couples seek to establish more egalitarian arrangements (Goldscheider et al. 2015; Gerson 2017; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015), especially when women express a desire or need (Carlson et al. 2020a). However, when an equitable division of labor is not achievable, men are more likely than women to revert to a traditional family arrangement (Gerson 2017; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015).

An extensive body of COVID-19-related research suggests that the pandemic generally deepened these pre-existing gender inequalities in the labor market and the home. The pandemic disproportionately affected female-dominated jobs (Alon et al. 2020; Fuller and Qian 2021). Women faced an increased risk of unemployment (Collins et al. 2020; Petts et al. 2021) and slower job recovery as the economy gradually reopened (Lofton et al. 2021). Mothers reduced work hours more often and in larger volumes than did fathers, even when both worked from home (Collins et al. 2020; Landivar et al. 2020) and especially when mothers were the sole providers of childcare (Petts et al. 2021; Zamarro and Prados 2021). At home, mothers shouldered the bulk of care work as schools and childcare facilities closed and distance learning models depended on parents at home for instruction and monitoring (Goudeau et al. 2021). Women also took on more housework (Dunatchik et al. 2021; Lyttelton et al. 2022) and childcare responsibilities (Calarco et al. 2021; Sevilla and Smith 2020), even in dual-income households where both parents worked at home (Zamarro and Prados 2021). And the loss of childcare supports and the demands of homeschooling demands are associated with the loss of employment for mothers but not fathers (Petts et al. 2021).

Research has also documented the consequences of these changes for parents' well-being. Academic research and popular media have both highlighted the high levels of stress experienced by employed mothers. Though fathers increased their time spent in childcare in the first few months of the pandemic (Carlson et al. 2020b; Shockley et al. 2020), they reduced their contributions as the pandemic continued. In October 2020, a greater percentage of mothers than fathers reported that balancing work and family became more difficult (Igielnik 2021). Highly educated women with children were especially likely to express distress as they tried to balance work and caregiving (Goldin 2022). All told, the impact of the pandemic on parents' work and family lives, the behavioral strategies they adopted to strike a balance between the two in the context of new, unprecedented circumstances, and how these patterns differed for mothers and fathers are well understood. Much less understood, however, is whether and how the pandemic shaped how parents think about what it means to balance work and family responsibilities or how one can or should do so. The major focus of our study is on this cognitive dimension of work and family life, including whether and how it shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In examining parents' conceptions of work–family balance, we consider the views of partnered parents of different genders who had varied arrangements for paid work and unpaid caregiving. In doing so, we enlarge the scope of study beyond employed mothers, the group to whom the issue of work–family balance is most often relegated. We thus identify and compare the different ways parents think about work–family balance and then examine how these diverse conceptions influenced their pandemic experiences. First, however, we survey prior academic conceptualizations of and approaches to understanding the concept of work–family balance.

1.2. Approaches to Understanding Work–Family Balance

The concept of "work–family balance", which originated in the fields of psychology and management, has centered on the individual as the unit of theorization and analysis. This perspective views individuals as embodying a set of social roles that give meaning and structure to their lives. The concept thus draws attention to the boundaries between an individual's commitments to paid work and unpaid family caregiving tasks (Frone 2003).

Studies using this conceptualization attend to the characteristics of boundaries, such as their permeability and flexibility, as predictors of imbalance and thus as sources of stress in individuals' lives (Frone 2003). This line of research also examines individuals' preferences for boundary management. Dumas and colleagues (Dumas et al. 2013) and Nippert-Eng (2008), for example, find that "integrators" prefer discussing family concerns at work and discussing work concerns at home, while "segmenters" prefer to silo and separate these life domains.

Building on this attention to individual work–family balance, scholars have sought to identify the extra-individual factors that influence a person's sense of balance and model the contextual antecedents of work–family conflict. One of the most widely studied factors is social support, defined as the "psychological or material resources provided through social relationships that can mitigate strains" (French et al. 2018). Michel and colleagues (Michel et al. 2011) show, for example, that spousal support—such as instrumental, emotional, informational advice, or feedback and appraisal—allows individuals to meet their demands in the family domain more effectively. Other contextual factors that shape the degree and type of personal work–family conflict include employers (Derks et al. 2015), organizational norms (Foucreault et al. 2018), work–family policies (Rothbard et al. 2005), and broader cultural norms around work (Mazmanian et al. 2013).

Gender, of course, provides a critical lens for understanding how and to what degree individuals experience work–family conflict. Sociologists have identified broad cultural schemas that view work and family as opposing devotions (Blair-Loy 2003) and gender norms that shape differences in experiences of work–family enrichment and conflict (Powell et al. 2009). Men and women both experience this conflict, but the "hegemonic narrative of work–family conflict" establishes this problem as solely a woman's problem (Padavic et al. 2020). This assumption has gendered consequences by diverting women from promotions and high-level positions of power when they use formally available but stigmatizing work–family policies, while inducing men to bear work–family conflict silently and reject accommodations for a problem that is not perceived as theirs (Padavic et al. 2020). Butts and colleagues (Butts et al. 2013) also find that gender moderates the relationship between social support and the experience of work–family conflict and job satisfaction. In Christine Williams's (Williams 2018) study of how workers in the oil and gas industry define work–family balance, she finds that work–family balance seems achievable to men, especially in households with a male-breadwinner model, but inaccessible to most women.

We seek to fill several gaps in these theorizations of work–family balance. First, frameworks that imply that work–family balance is relevant only for individuals with both paid work and caregiving responsibilities presume too narrow a scope. We find that even parents who are not employed in the formal labor force also deploy narratives of work–family balance.

Second, most research on work–family balance focuses on the work–family interface in terms of stressors, such as work–family conflict that arises when "role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect" (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985, p. 77). However, in line with previous researchers (e.g., Sirgy and Lee 2018; Crosby 1991), we argue for expanding the scope of focus to examine how parents conceive of both balance and imbalance in the ways that can either combine or separate paid work and family caregiving responsibilities.

Third, psychological models of social support, which point to a lack of spousal support as an antecedent to work–family conflict, underestimate the ways in which individuals' conceptions of balance can include partner support as a constitutive element of defining balance and how to achieve it. Indeed, some sociologists have been more explicit about the inherently social nature of work and family responsibilities, arguing that both are "role-related expectations that are socially negotiated and shared", particularly with one's partner (Grzywacz and Carlson 2007). Yet even such definitions of work–family balance assume that the individual—not the couple—is responsible for accomplishing balance by integrating work and family responsibilities. Our findings show, however, that some groups of parents conceive of work–family balance as a joint, rather than an individual, characteristic that applies to the household as a unit.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Sample

To understand how parents conceive of and evaluate their own work–family balance, we analyzed in-depth interviews with 88 adults who are married to or cohabiting with a partner of a different gender and who care for at least one child aged 18 or under. Study participants were recruited as part of a larger project, where a nationally representative sample of Americans with responsibilities for elder care or childcare were collected via the National Opinion Research Center's AmeriSpeak survey (NORC at the University of Chicago 2022). We contacted those who completed the survey and met this study's eligibility criteria for having childcare responsibilities. The overall response rate was approximately 25 percent. The interviews were conducted from June 2021 to February 2022, all via Zoom. During the data collection process, we also employed snowball sampling (Noy 2008), which generated a dozen additional interviews. Table 1 summarizes selected demographic and economic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Sample Descriptive Statistics.

	Women		Men		Total	
	n	Proportion of Women	n	Proportion of Men	N	Proportion of Total
Racial and ethnic identity						
White, not Latino/a/e	36	0.71	25	0.68	61	0.69
Latino/a/e	6	0.12	6	0.16	12	0.14
Black, not Latino/a/e	5	0.1	4	0.11	9	0.1
Other racial/ethnic identity	4	0.08	2	0.05	6	0.07
Age range						
20–29	3	0.06	1	0.03	4	0.05
30–39	30	0.59	12	0.32	42	0.48
40–49	14	0.27	22	0.59	36	0.41
50 or older	4	0.08	2	0.05	6	0.07
Marital status						
Married	43	0.84	36	0.97	79	0.9
Cohabiting	8	0.16	1	0.03	9	0.1
Number of children						
1	10	0.2	13	0.35	23	0.26
2	23	0.45	17	0.46	40	0.45
3	11	0.22	3	0.08	14	0.16
4 or more	7	0.14	4	0.11	11	0.13
Children's ages						
At least 1 child under age 6	30	0.59	19	0.51	49	0.56
At least 1 child between ages 6–12	14	0.27	12	0.32	26	0.29
All children over age 12	7	0.13	6	0.16	13	0.14
Household employment dynamics pre-pandemic						
Dual full-time (at least 35 h a week)	36	0.71	19	0.51	55	0.63
Female full-time/male part-time	1	0.02	1	0.03	2	0.03
Female part-time/male full-time	9	0.18	7	0.19	16	0.18
Female not in labor force/male full-time	5	0.10	10	0.27	15	0.17
Household income, annually						
Under USD 50,000	9	0.18	3	0.08	12	0.14
USD 50,000–74,999	13	0.25	6	0.16	19	0.22
USD 75,000–99,999	10	0.2	5	0.14	15	0.17
USD 100,000–149,999	8	0.16	14	0.38	22	0.25
USD 150,000 or more	11	0.22	8	0.22	19	0.22
Refused to disclose	0	0	1	0.03	1	0.01
Sample sizes	51		37		88	

We focused on partnered parents—married or cohabiting—for its theoretical advantages in illuminating how people think about and manage work and family responsibilities within the context of a two-parent household. Couples who live with dependent children are best positioned to cast light on the ways people conceive of, negotiate, and enact patterns of work–family balance, in contrast to elder care, which may be the responsibility of a range of kin and institutions outside the home. To understand how gender influences views on and decisions about paid and unpaid labor, we examined heterosexual partnered respondents (Killewald and García-Manglano 2016). We predicted that partnered parents' ability to draw on spousal support—and variation in their experiences of spousal support—would have implications for their conceptions of work–family balance. Our findings nevertheless reflect the views of individuals who are not in relationships with one another, which limits our ability to examine whether couples in the same household hold similar or different conceptions of work–family balance.

2.2. Data Analysis

Interviews ranged from 40 min to 2 h and 30 min, averaging about 90 min each. We asked a variety of questions about the respondents' responsibilities for earning income, taking care of their children, and completing household chores, as well as how those responsibilities were shared between partners before and during the pandemic. We followed up by asking how they felt about these responsibilities and arrangements, exploring if any changes in these arrangements occurred during the pandemic. We also addressed the best and worst aspects of the pandemic for the respondents' work and home lives as well as any lessons they learned through the experience. Through these answers, we were able to create a holistic understanding of interviewees' conceptions of work–family balance, their level of satisfaction with their balance, and whether their outlook changed as the pandemic proceeded.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded by the researchers and their colleagues. Interview transcripts were coded using Atlas.ti, a piece of software for qualitative data analysis. We conducted intensive analysis (Silverman 2015) on a set of twenty interviews (selected for variation in demographic characteristics) and relied on a flexible coding approach (Deterding and Waters 2021) in order to develop and refine category codes pertaining to relevant themes (e.g., structural arrangements of work and caregiving before, during, and after the pandemic for respondents and their partners, experiences of work–family conflict pre-pandemic and over the course of the pandemic for respondents and partners, respondent conceptualizations of work–family balance and changes therein pre-pandemic and at the time of interview, and respondents' reported satisfaction with their balance of work and caregiving responsibilities before the pandemic and at the time of interview). After coding the transcripts, we categorized respondents by their conceptions of work–family balance, then reread the categorized transcripts to discuss examples that illustrated different categorizations as well as examples that illustrated exceptions to these patterns. We then repeated this process recursively for the remaining transcripts, engaging especially with anomalous cases and revising our analytic categories based on additional evidence.

3. Results

3.1. Three Conceptions of Work–Family Balance

Interviewees reported holding a diverse range of beliefs about how they conceived of work–family balance at the outset of the pandemic. As Figure 1 shows, these conceptions about what it means to balance work and family can be grouped into three categories, which we label "individualistic" (which accounts for 45 percent of our total sample), "specialized" (25 percent) and "egalitarian" (30 percent). These views diverge according to whether balance is conceived as an individual or a couple-level attribute and, for those who conceive of balance at the couple level, whether it involves specializing in different spheres or coordinating participation in both spheres with the goal of equal sharing.

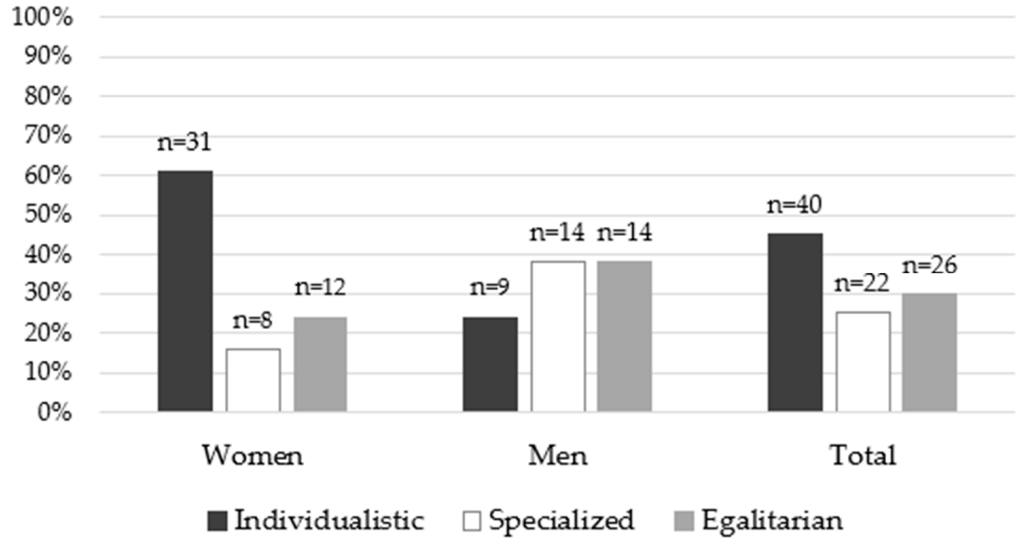

Figure 1. Three Conceptions of Work–family Balance, by Gender.

Figure 1 also shows how these conceptions are distributed across gender groups. Women are far more likely than men to conceive of balance as an individual attribute, with 61 percent of women expressing this view compared with 24 percent of men. In contrast, men are more likely to see balance as the result of specializing in separate spheres, with 38 percent of men adopting this view compared with only 16 percent of women. Among those who held an egalitarian conception of work–family balance at the outset of the pandemic, the gender gap is smaller—although more men (38 percent) than women (24 percent) conceive of balance in this way.

On one level, it is not surprising to find gender disparities in conceptions of work–family balance—especially the difference between women, who are more likely to see balance as an individual responsibility, and men, who are more likely to view it as a challenge for the couple to tackle. Yet prior research has shed little light on either the existence of such diverse views or its importance for how households approach and experience the intensifying modern conflicts between work and family life. As a result, we also know very little about how these contrasting conceptions of balance have influenced people's pandemic responses.

3.1.1. Individualistic Conception of Work–Family Balance

About sixty percent of women (31 of 51) and a quarter of men (9 of 37) viewed work–family balance as an individual attribute that was independent of their partner's distribution of breadwinning and caregiving responsibilities. This conception most closely resembles the original and still most prevalent use of the term, which arose as a way to identify and analyze the work–family conflicts that parents—especially mothers—increasingly faced as they joined the labor force, took full-time jobs, and pursued lifelong careers. For Belicia, a working mother with two preschool-aged children, achieving balance meant giving as much as she could both at work and at home:

> I think it is always hard to feel a balance, and when society is so different now where, sometimes people make it seem like, because you're a working mom, you're not giving it your all at home and your kids are missing out. So there's always that tugging at the heart. But I feel like a person like in my own aspect I feel like I can give 100% at work and 100% at home. And that's what I always strive for even when sometimes it can be a bit overwhelming, but I feel like my kids are growing and doing well with the balance that I have going, so I feel like it's working for us.

Individualistic perspectives, which women were overwhelmingly more likely than men to espouse, assumed that it is their "personal responsibility" (Collins 2019) to combine work and family and to do so with dedication to and efficiency in their commitments as both a worker and a parent (Blair-Loy 2003; Gerson 1985; Hays 1996).

In this group of thirty-one women, all were employed (twenty-four on a full-time basis and seven on a part-time basis) while also assuming primary responsibility for childcare and the bulk of housework. In fact, many of the women who worked part-time in this group had already switched from full-time work earlier in their career trajectories to make their workforce participation more compatible with accommodating their children's caregiving needs. The men in this group all held full-time jobs but had partners whose breadwinning and caregiving contributions were similar to the women respondents in this group. Accordingly, individualistic women's and men's daily routines diverged. Women's work and domestic routines tended to revolve around their children's schedules as they attempted to juggle both realms on their own. On the other hand, men were relatively free from these challenges since their partners shouldered the brunt of the responsibility for caregiving. As a result, these men viewed their own work–family balance as the balance between their time in and out of the workplace rather than in the family (Williams 2018).

Women and men both gave little thought to seeking balance as a couple. Instead, they viewed balance as an individual challenge that was not conditional on their partner's participation in breadwinning and caregiving. The uncoupling of their partner's contributions from their conception of how to achieve work–family balance unfolded differently for individualistic women and men. For individualistic women, their partners' contributions in caregiving were largely unreliable and thus were not factored into their own attainment of work–family balance. In contrast, for individualistic men, their partners' contributions in caregiving were taken for granted, which allowed them to pursue personal balance with less consideration for their partners' balance or lack thereof.

3.1.2. Specialized Conception of Work–Family Balance

About 16 percent of women (8 of 51), compared with close to 40 percent of men (14 of 37), conceived of work–family balance in specialized terms—that is, as a property of the couple rather than the individual and with each partner specializing in one sphere and relying on the other partner for the other. In such an arrangement, achieving work–family balance did not require each parent to be equally engaged in both spheres. To the contrary, accomplishing balance depended on each member of the couple making an equivalent but distinct contribution. For instance, when asked about the ideal arrangement of work and care for his family of three, Jimmy replied: "Me working full-time, her working part-time, as long as the bills are being paid and our son is being taken care of—which was the most important part— . . . by [my wife]."

Not surprisingly, most also presumed that traditional gender norms, based on the notion of "complementary roles", dictated who specializes in which sphere, such that the male primary breadwinner economic arrangement prevailed for all respondents in this group except one. Women with a specialized conception took primary responsibility of the domestic sphere and either worked part-time (3 of 8) or did not participate in the labor force (5 of 8). Men, in contrast, believed they were responsible for breadwinning, and that the domestic sphere should be a woman's specialty. One man with a specialized view lived in a gender-reversed household where he worked remotely at a part-time job and took primary responsibility for childcare and housework while his wife worked full-time outside the home. Overall, even considering this one reversed arrangement, these women and men stressed a couple-oriented perspective that conceived of balance as the outcome when each member of the couple focused on one of two separate spheres.

3.1.3. Egalitarian Conception of Work–Family Balan

Close to a quarter of women (12 of 51) and nearly 40 percent of men (14 of 37) reported conceiving of balance as the equal sharing of breadwinning and caretaking responsibilities. Like their specialized peers, this group also viewed balance as an attribute of the couple, but they emphasized the conscientious efforts they made to splitting domestic responsibilities—including childcare, household chores, and maintaining a mental list of these tasks—with their partners in addition to their shared commitments to paid work. While specific tasks might be regularly assigned to one partner, it was regarded that domestic work as a whole should be shared even if that meant adopting a "divide and conquer" outlook. For example, Tommy described the intentionality with which he and his partner coordinated their respective full-time work schedules so that each parent was separately responsible for their 6-year-old son's morning and evening routines:

> [T]he way we balanced the childcare—that's really what we're looking at here—we have always basically shifted our work schedules off of each other to split it. So that basically my morning I would get up and go straight to work while both of them were still asleep. I always worked early in, early out. . .. And then she would get up, get the kid up, even some breakfast and get him off to daycare while she went off to went off to her work downtown, and then I'd be done with work. I'd come home, pick him up and I take care of him in the evening and get him some dinner. And then she'd get home for a little bit of family time before bed for him.

Egalitarian parents emphasized flexible sharing to prioritize tasks and accomplish, either separately or jointly, "whatever needs to be done", while also relying on two incomes (Gerson 2010). Almost all in this group suggested that their conceptions aligned well with what they actually did in dividing paid and unpaid labor. Except for one man whose partner worked part-time, they were in dual full-time working households where domestic responsibilities were shared equally among partners. These women and men expected equal engagement in earning and in caregiving for both themselves and their partners, and they saw this as key to achieving work–family balance. Unlike those whose conceptions of balance were individualistic or specialized, the shape of these parents' daily lives generally resembled the shape of their partners' daily routines.

3.2. Change and Continuity in Satisfaction with Work–Family Balance over the Course of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic created disruptions in both the care infrastructure and the workplace, with schools and childcare centers closing and many businesses establishing and expanding work-from-home policies. Our interviews reveal that these society-wide disruptions of routines forced many families to reconfigure their arrangements for care and work, influencing parents' satisfaction with how they combined paid and unpaid work in their households and increasing the salience of what it means to have work–family balance. For less than 40 percent of the sample, these changes persisted only in the short-term while the pandemic was at its most acute. For many of these respondents, any disequilibrium in their work–family balance was perceived as pandemic-specific aberrations due to the unprecedented circumstances. Others felt that their approach to work–family balance did not change; instead, as the set of responsibilities they faced for work and family care grew, their original approach allowed them to maintain balance as they had before the pandemic. At the time of our interviews in the latter half of 2021 through the beginning of 2022, these parents reported that their satisfaction with their work–family balance had returned to their pre-pandemic status quo.

However, for most of our sample, we find that parents' pandemic experiences had an enduring influence on their satisfaction with their work–family balance, even after stay-at-home orders were lifted and schools reopened. Two trajectories that characterized the accounts of similar numbers of parents in our sample emerged after the height of the pandemic. In one, the pandemic exacerbated the tensions between work and caregiving

responsibilities and brought unresolved negative changes in parents' satisfaction with their work–family balance. Work–family balance thus remained an elusive goal for these parents. In another, the pandemic brought positive changes in parents' satisfaction by improving flexibility in the work sphere, thereby easing the reconciliation of the work and family spheres and constituting a new normal. We also find that increases in satisfaction and in dissatisfaction were distributed unequally across groups by work–family balance conception and by gender. Compared to parents with specialized and egalitarian conceptions, mothers with individualistic conceptions were more likely to report either an increase or a decrease in their satisfaction with their work–family balance amid the unfolding pandemic. Additionally, regardless of how they conceived of balance, mothers were much more likely than fathers to experience declining satisfaction with their balance of work and caregiving responsibilities. We discuss these gender differences for the three groups in turn.

3.2.1. Individualistic Conceptions: Changes in Women's (but Not Men's) Satisfaction

Among all three groups, respondents with individualistic conceptions showed the most dynamic changes in satisfaction with their balance of work and caregiving responsibilities as well as the largest differences between mothers and fathers. Figure 2 shows the distribution of respondents' reported change in satisfaction from just before the pandemic to one and a half to two years after its onset, by work–family balance conceptions and gender. Among women who viewed work–family balance as an individual attribute, 52 percent (16 mothers) reported that their dissatisfaction with their balance grew during the pandemic, while 29 percent (9 mothers) became more satisfied, leaving the remaining fifth of mothers reporting no change in their level of satisfaction. Among the smaller group of men in this group, however, almost everyone reported no change in their level of satisfaction, with the remaining two men reporting change in each direction.

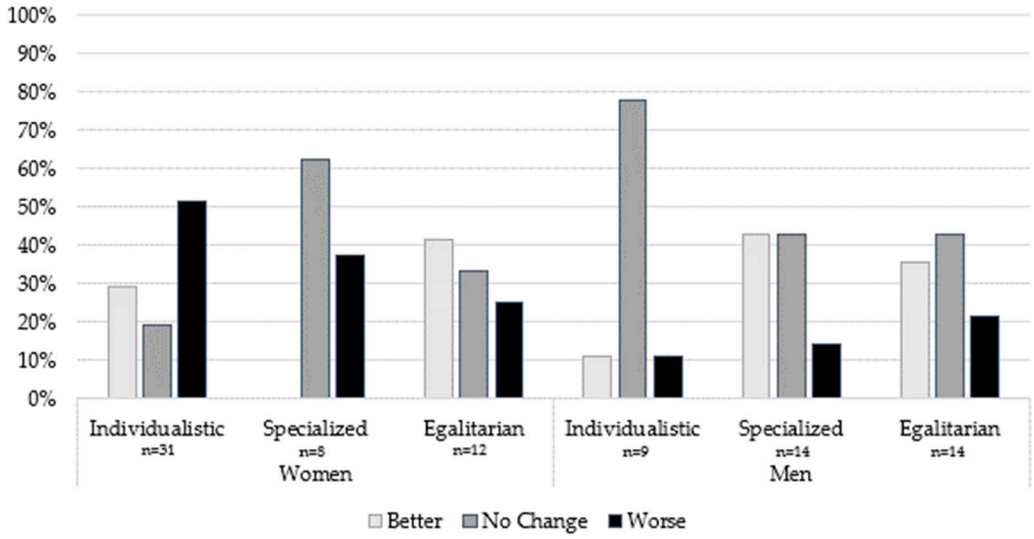

Figure 2. Change in Satisfaction with Work–Family Balance, by Gender and Conception of Balance.

Mothers who became dissatisfied had either undertaken a substantial and, to a degree, undesired change in their work situation in order to accommodate family needs or were still in the midst of navigating greater work–family conflict as they struggled to cope with the increased demands brought by the pandemic. When childcare facilities closed, for example, Diane, a mother of three young children, left her job as a dental assistant and began working as a babysitter for a neighboring family's two children so that she could watch her own children at the same time. She said: "I'm very lucky I'm able to stay home with my own kids. . . I don't trust other people with taking care of my kids. I'm very picky". Although her current work aligned with her values about watching her own children, it

was difficult to reconcile with the worth and self-esteem that she derived from excelling at the office job that she had enjoyed. In fact, despite being paid and working 32 h a week as a caregiver, she identified as a "stay-at-home mom". Even after daycare reopened, maintaining their new reality made more sense financially and logistically, although it came at some expense to their well-being:

> I mean, just staying home is just easier and works out better. . . I miss [working in the dental office] . . . It's hard because it's very rewarding. I like treating patients. I love just being very good at what I'm doing and being compensated for that. It's great work, and I love the people. It's hard for me because I'm very social, [and now] I'm a stay-at-home mom.

Unlike Diane, Victoria, a mother of two children aged 5 and 3, worked throughout the pandemic as a pharmacy technician. When her partner, who worked in construction, was laid off, she asked for more hours so that the family could make ends meet. Like Diane, Victoria expressed the desire to be the one to care for her children, but for her, there were also financial exigencies to contend with: "I wanted to spend time with my kids. . . I want to be here with my kids. . . You want to be there, but you can't because you have to come provide income for the household and stuff, so it was pretty hard". Victoria's dissatisfaction stemmed from the persisting tension between the time demands of her in-person job and the concurrent time that she yearned to "be there" for her children. A resolution was unlikely to be found in her partner, who continued to shirk household chores, or her employer, who requested more hours in the face of COVID-19's persisting disruptions to the labor supply, so the only change that seemed available for her to make was in her labor force participation: "I came to the point where I was really tired, I was ready to quit my job. I can't go to work anymore, I don't want to work. No more." Victoria ultimately reduced her work hours, even though that worsened financial prospects for their family. The pandemic exacerbated work–family conflicts for Diane, Victoria, and the other mothers who relied only on themselves to resolve competing demands and their satisfaction suffered as a result.

Among women for whom the pandemic improved satisfaction with their work–family balance, almost two-thirds (14) held individualistic perspectives. The pandemic's stay-at-home orders forced many employers to reconfigure the structure of work by expanding the prevalence of remote work and, consequently, the autonomy afforded to workers over when and how they met their job responsibilities. Although access to more flexible work was partial, these new realities showed mothers in privileged positions that previous experiences of conflict between work and caregiving demands were not inevitable. Rather than taking sole responsibility for managing the conflicting expectations at work and at home, mothers in our sample began to shift their expectations and demands about employers' roles in creating work conditions conducive to meeting family obligations. In addition, some of these women also began to move away from an individualistic approach to work–family balance and instead towards ones that made greater claims on their partner to increase responsibility for meeting obligations at home.

For Dora, a mother of a 12-year-old and a civil engineer working for a city agency, the pandemic prompted a change in what it meant to balance work and family. At the outset of the pandemic, Dora started working from home and continued to do so even after the option to go back to the office became available. The experience of working from home gave Dora greater satisfaction in her work–family balance, though she felt that she already had it prior to the pandemic. This prompted Dora to re-evaluate the pre-pandemic status quo at work, which had left her striving to achieve work–family balance primarily on her own. Now, she settled on a different view of balance, holding employers more responsible for recognizing and supporting the caregiving needs of workers since it was patently possible:

> Before [the pandemic], it was 'Well, yeah, you have work–life balance.' I was like, 'Well, I have vacation time or sick leave that I could use.' Because I didn't understand what work–life balance really was. To me, work–life balance was the fact that I was able to call my boss and say, 'Hey, I need to pick up my son because an emergency happened.' And they allowed me to, and that to me was work–life balance. And so now, the pandemic has taught me that it's different. I think it's making all of the things that you normally have to do in your life—making that something that's easy to navigate through and also providing the time or the compensation for it.

Renee, a college program director and mother of two preschool children, was similarly determined to find a new position that would allow her to work from home, at least part-time. When her employer refused to allow a remote option after a return to the office became possible, she quit her job. When new alternatives such as working from home became an option, it prompted a reassessment of her prior work–family reconciliation strategies as well as new ways of conceiving what balance meant and how it could be achieved:

> My family's coming first, and I don't think I'm going to let an employer in the future dictate that to me as much as I did . . . I think the pandemic helped me clarify personal boundaries of what I will and will not accept from an employer moving forward and the importance of my 'mom hat' and how important that is for my kids. . . In my exit interview, I said 'If you don't start being flexible and understanding of different situations, you're not going to be able to recruit talent, you're not going to keep your talent.'

These reassessments were not confined to the workplace. Even though the perspective that balance remained largely a mother's challenge was not necessarily upended, some women began to demand change from their partners, thus veering toward egalitarian conceptions. Miranda, an architect who had been working part-time in an arrangement she made to "be there" for her twin 12-year-old sons after school hours, is one of them. The pandemic-induced transition to remote work freed up her time from commuting and transporting her children to and from school, which not only allowed her to increase her work hours to full-time but also to spend more time with her children. Her husband, who also began to work remotely, spent more time with the family as well and shared household chores. The pandemic had allowed her to question the necessity of making career sacrifices to achieve work–family balance. At the time of the interview, she was preparing to start her own business with her husband as joint co-founders:

> I saw that I didn't have to make those sacrifices. . .I feel more empowered to say, 'This is what I need and not. It might not be how things used to be done, but I need to do it this way.' Instead of saying, 'Okay, that's how things are done, I'm just going to make the sacrifice for my own career because I can't fit into this structure.' I think I got more empowered to say that I can still do everything as long as I don't have to fit into this structure.

Whatever the direction of change, each of these trajectories of satisfaction with balance highlight how the effects of the pandemic were most likely to affect women who had adopted an individualistic approach of balancing work and family responsibilities as it had left them facing tradeoffs and making compromises that women who viewed balance at the couple level were less likely to confront. In contrast, most of the much smaller group of men with an individualistic conception did not report change in satisfaction with their balance of work and caregiving. From these fathers' perspectives, their partners (much like the women interviewees who expressed an individualistic perspective) made work adjustments to absorb the amplified caregiving needs brought on by the pandemic, requiring little change in how they structured their lives.

One example is Henry, a pilot for a private airline and a father of two children aged 11 and 9. Even though he espoused an individualistic perspective, he relied heavily on his wife, an accountant who also worked full-time but had conscientiously made a job switch prior to the pandemic to be able to work from home and address their family's childcare needs while she worked. Since he could continue to depend on his wife's work flexibility, he neither changed his outlook nor relatively high level of satisfaction with his work–family balance during the pandemic. As he explained:

> There's a lot of doctor visits [for the kids], and she doesn't even have to try to schedule around her work schedule for anything. She just puts it on the calendar and then schedules her work around the rest of her life ... Being a pilot, my schedule's always jacked up, I have no schedule, because it's always changing. So her being able to drop everything at a moment's notice and take care of the kids helps me out a lot, because I don't have to worry about where I am.

3.2.2. Specialized Conceptions: Diverging Directions of Satisfaction by Gender

Among the 16 percent of women and 38 percent of men who adopted a couple-level approach that stressed accomplishing balance through specialization, about 63 percent of women (n = 5) and 43 percent of men (n = 6) said they maintained the level of satisfaction they felt prior to the pandemic. For the remaining three mothers and eight fathers, however, pandemic-related experiences shifted women's and men's level of satisfaction in disparate directions. Almost half of men who espoused specialized conceptions of work–family balance saw an improvement in their satisfaction with their balance during the pandemic whereas only one-fifth's satisfaction declined. In contrast, no women reported an improvement in their satisfaction and three mothers reported a decline.

Among the men who became more satisfied with their balance, nearly all had transitioned to working from home. Released from the need to commute and to maintain rigid work schedules at the office, these men were able to enjoy greater leisure and autonomy in how they organized their time. They remarked on the joys of spending more time with their children than they had in the past. Yet, these shifts rarely meant participating more in their partners' specialty by doing time-intensive domestic tasks such as cooking and feeding the children or cleaning their rooms. In line with their specialized conceptions of balance that deferred primary responsibility of care work to their partners, fathers' increased time with their children focused on playing with, transporting, and joining them in a shared activity.

For Matthew, a finance analyst and a father of two, work–family balance meant working at his job, sharing family meals in the evenings and on the weekends, enjoying leisure time, and occasionally attending his children's school events. He believed in what he called a "traditional, conservative lifestyle of arrangement" that depended on his wife, a part-time banker, to take care of the routine activities of childcare and household management. When the pandemic offered him the chance to work from home, it became easier for him to reconcile attendance at his children's school events with his work schedule:

> The pandemic allowed me to be more flexible in the sense of going to my kids' event at school during the middle of the day. I can flex my time ... Attending that six o'clock [work] meeting is not as bad as it once was ... The flexibility of virtual work, I've loved it.

As Matthew's case illustrates, remote work afforded more family time and greater work flexibility to men who viewed balance through the lens of specialization. As their partners continued to carry out the bulk of domestic responsibilities, these men were able to enjoy the perks of working from home without any obligation or inclination to take on an increased level of routine childcare and domestic work.

Jamie, in contrast, provides a revealing exception. While most men who entered the pandemic with a specialized view maintained this perspective, Jamie modified his

conception of his responsibility for household management. Although he continued to work on-site as a mechanic and the sole provider for his wife and 4-year-old son, the pandemic prompted Jamie to reassess his strictly specialized view of balance. Forced to spend more time at home due to COVID restrictions, he took stock of just how much childcare and housework his wife had been shouldering alone—an insight that spurred him to put "family over money" and switch to a new job that brought a pay cut but required fewer hours and offered a more predictable schedule. Consequently, he not only became more involved in the work of caring for his child and home, but also noted how such a change improved his own and his wife's well-being:

> I love my wife and I want the best for her. I don't want her to feel like a slave in her own home. But [before the pandemic] that's what I made her feel like . . . [Now] at 3:30, I can set my tools down and walk away. And that's what me and my wife discovered what we wanted . . . I'm home more these days. Monday's laundry. Tuesday's cleaning the cat litter. Wednesday, I take the trash out. I basically try to figure out what I can do for her . . . Making my family happy is what makes me happy as well.

Although Jamie remained the sole breadwinner and his wife remained the sole caregiver while he was at work, the responsibility for family tasks became more equally shared outside of work hours. In contrast, women who stressed specialization were more likely to experience ever mounting household and caregiving responsibilities as the formal infrastructure of childcare disappeared, remote schooling requiring their supervision became the norm, and time at home surged for everyone in the household. For these women, the pandemic compounded the fact that they had no respite from their workload at home. Not surprisingly, the intensification of physical, emotional, and cognitive labor tended to undermine these women's satisfaction with their specialized conception of balance.

Beatrice, a stay-at-home mother of two children, experienced this decline. Although her husband, a high school teacher and soccer coach, shifted to remote work, he sequestered himself in his basement office and began to work longer hours. In addition to the increased volume of housework, Beatrice found herself solely responsible for monitoring her four-year-old's virtual preschool activities while simultaneously taking care of her two-year-old. Although she did not expect her husband to share the increased load in an equal way, let alone voice her wishes, she became resentful of his failure to provide enough moral support:

> I think we have a really nice balance, so I'm comfortable with all that. The only thing I would say when I get really stressed is about the kids . . . I'll be like, you have to help me . . . What I need more from him is just like the mental, emotional drain that it puts on me . . . I don't need assistance with logistics. I need the emotional support . . . I definitely feel sometimes that elephants are on my shoulders, and I just want him to lighten the load just a little.

Another mother who was not in the workforce, Kate, struggled with the rising load of housework and childcare responsibilities when she became responsible for her oldest child's remote preschool instruction on top of her care for her two younger children. Her dissatisfaction grew when the pandemic extended her husband's months of absence as a soldier. Left "essentially single parenting", she not only expressed growing feelings of exhaustion and frustration, but also began to wish for a partner who could and would share the workload of raising three children and maintaining a home:

> I always wish that—not having to ask is the big thing. Like, if you see this thing that needs to be done, can you just do it? Because I don't want to have to be the delegator of all the labor and the house . . . It's not necessarily my job to dole out those assignments . . . It's always just kind of been the same, but having that extra stress [during the pandemic] just kind of amplified things that were already present.

Notably, the two men who recounted a similar decline in satisfaction were in a gender-reversed arrangement. Aaron, a father of a 6-year-old, worked short, irregular hours from home while his wife worked full-time as a high school teacher. As the pandemic continued, Aaron became increasingly dissatisfied as his wife struggled with overwork. While he did not expect her to help him with the increased childcare and household responsibilities, the decline in her satisfaction—brought on by the increase in her working time—undermined his satisfaction as well: "My wife was under an awful lot of stress . . . We used to never fight, but we've had several bickering matches . . . She is breaking mentally and we have to carve out time for our daughter. It's just wrong." Like Kate and Beatrice, however, Aaron felt powerless to act. From their perspective, the source of both work–family conflict and potential resolution seemed to depend on their partners, but no change was forthcoming, whether in the structure of their partner's work or in their partner's mindsets. In all three cases, the crisis in their balance remained unresolved, keeping their satisfaction low.

3.2.3. Egalitarian Conceptions: Continued Communication and Cooperation

The egalitarian model of work–family balance largely withstood the pandemic's challenges, with over 75 percent of women and 79 percent of men who espoused egalitarian perspectives remaining satisfied or becoming more satisfied. Joshua, a gardener and father of two, explained that he and his wife shared breadwinning and caregiving responsibilities "so nobody feels like they've got the disadvantage" and continued that approach throughout the pandemic. As a result, he was among the 43 percent of egalitarian men (6 of 14) and 33 percent of women (4 of 12) in our sample who maintained their relatively high levels of satisfaction with their balance throughout the pandemic. Monique, a clinical laboratory scientist and mother of an 8-year-old child, explained why she did not experience the need to reevaluate or alter her shared approach: "It's pretty much the same [as before the pandemic]. Basically, if it's not broke, don't fix it. And it works! Might as well keep it that way."

Ten egalitarian participants—equally divided between women and men—felt more satisfied during the pandemic, largely due to transition to remote work. As remote work afforded more flexibility to their routines and reduced the time spent commuting to work, egalitarian couples had more time to spend on their shared domestic tasks as well as leisure activities, which in turn improved both their personal sense of balance and the balance between the couple. Some, like Joe, became more efficient in their ability to complete breadwinning and caregiving tasks, and others, like Holly, came closer to achieving the couple-level balance that they intended pre-pandemic.

Joe, an IT specialist and father of one teenager, prioritized work–life balance before the pandemic and found himself better able to complete his care and work tasks when working remotely. In praise of remote work, he explained: "My concentration is better. I'm not interrupted constantly during my day, and [I love] the flexibility. I can take my daughter to practice, take her to school, pick her up, and then come back and continue to work until I meet my work obligation." Holly, a college admissions counselor and mother of two children under 5, rated her degree of satisfaction before the pandemic as a seven out of ten, and her satisfaction with work–family balance at the time of her interview was "higher, but I'm trying to figure out how much higher . . . It's like an eight, or nine. A little bit more." Working from home, which afforded greater freedom and smoother, more consistent coordination of childcare between Holly and her husband, accounted for the improvement. As she noted:

> He could be around more. If he wasn't arriving home till after seven, I was taking care of them from the time we got home around six to that time . . . Just with his ability to step away—even if he does go back to work after the kids go to bed—he's at least available to put them to bed or brush their teeth or whatever.

In contrast, six interviewees—also evenly distributed by gender—reported becoming less satisfied. This decline occurred when new work requirements encroached on the

time once available for domestic pursuits. These work surges made it more difficult for egalitarian-minded individuals to enact their conceptions of balance. Work surges that threatened to become permanent shifted their views on the significance of work in their lives. With their satisfaction depending on sharing work and family obligations and achieving personal balance, maintaining satisfaction then depended on their willingness to modify their job situation to better fit with their domestic commitments.

Brian, for example, found his work–family balance to be "completely satisfying" before the pandemic. As a high school teacher whose wife worked full-time in public health, he became dissatisfied over the course of the pandemic as both their workloads increased. To cope with this sense of overwork, he changed his outlook on work itself. He now believed that "it's just a job, versus it's my life. I think I cared a lot more about my job than I do now." By decreasing the significance of work in his life, he was able to maintain his conception of balance and strove to implement it in his life. At the same time, his collaborative approach to achieving balance had not changed: "When I had my thing at the beginning of the year, she really stepped up, and she was there for me. And then I tried to do that for her."

Courtney, an energy executive with a teenager at home, also became less satisfied over the course of the pandemic. When Courtney and her husband, a school administrator, both moved to remote work at the beginning of the pandemic, her workload increased. At a result, she looked to her husband to compensate at home for the loss of her available time, thus recalibrating balance at the couple level: "The work I did became more hours and became really critical, so I just dropped most of my household stuff at the beginning, which worked out fine because my husband's work was largely inactive, and so he would cook . . . He just took a lot of that on." However, Courtney's husband could only temporarily offer domestic support while she coped with more demands at work; he could not sustain that level of support indefinitely. Once her husband's work ramped back up in the fall, they both had to withdraw their focus on the domestic front. Their commitment to equal balance remained, but the enactment of that principle became equally dissatisfying: "In terms of housework, literally nothing is getting done. We're lucky if one of us cooks. We've increased our takeout . . . This house is forever a disaster. In terms of chores, nobody is doing them."

Because women and men with egalitarian conceptions at the outset believed that both partners should assume individual responsibility at work along with sharing responsibility at home and thus had already made shared efforts to respond to work–family conflicts, their couple-level arrangements more readily adapted to maintain shared participation even as the pandemic brought additional tasks and responsibilities. Parents who held egalitarian conceptions of work–family balance described purposeful—and often complex—efforts to adapt their work schedules and continue practicing their egalitarian practices throughout the pandemic. Relying on teamwork, these couples supported each other through temporary shifts in their individual work obligations, which helped them navigate unpredictable obstacles without relinquishing a longer-term commitment to sharing. Even those parents who faced challenges to securing paid work that would support their egalitarian preferences were willing to make adjustments that would allow them to pursue a shared approach to work–life balance.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Conceptions of what constitutes work–family balance remain a largely neglected topic in the analysis of the connections among work, family, and gender inequality. We analyzed 88 in-depth interviews with heterosexual partnered parents to identify the different ways that parents define what it means to balance work and family life and to ascertain whether pre-pandemic conceptions influenced their perceived satisfaction as conditions changed during the pandemic. We found that, contrary to sharing a unified view, our interviewees expressed three distinct conceptions of what constitutes work–family balance: (1) individualistic, where balance is conceived as an individual challenge and responsibility; (2) specialized, where balance is conceived as a couple-level challenge best

achieved when each partner concentrates on a different sphere; and (3) egalitarian, where balance is conceived as a couple-level challenge that is achieved when both partners share responsibility in both spheres.

Recognizing the varied ways that parents can define work–family balance extends both conventional and scholarly definitions of the concept. Incorporating this broader view, and especially the notion that work–family balance can be conceived as an attribute of a couple rather than an individual, provides an alternative framework not just for defining the concept but also for examining how conceptions of work–family balance both shape and emerge from couples' efforts to negotiate the rising conflicts between paid work and family life. In addition to recognizing that the search for work–family balance need not be a purely individual pursuit, it is also important to recognize that a couple-focused conceptualization can take different forms, with vastly different implications for the division of household labor (DeMaris and Longmore 1996; Gager 2008; Smith et al. 1998). Specialized views, which define balance as the result of each member of a couple focusing on a different sphere (Becker 1981), closely resemble the equity principle of fairness, according to which men's financial contributions offset women's unpaid contributions to caregiving and housework. An egalitarian conception, which defines balance as a collective enterprise that envisions each person contributing to both spheres, aligns with an equality principle of fairness in which both paid and unpaid work should be distributed equally between partners. This view grants equal importance to caregiving, regardless of such external factors as how much income a partner contributes.

A much higher proportion of women espoused an individualistic conception of work–family balance, which left them responsible for finding a way to integrate the two spheres regardless of their partner's contribution. Men, in contrast, were far more likely to espouse egalitarian or specialized conceptions, even when both partners held paid jobs. These gender differences did not simply reflect differences in paid work time or time availability. For instance, two-thirds of female respondents who were in dual-earner couples (24 of 36) espoused individualistic conceptions of work–family balance, whereas their male counterparts were much more likely to conceive of it in egalitarian terms (13 of 19).

The gender disparity in conceptions of balance points to the continuing force of cultural expectations that hold mothers primarily responsible for caregiving, even as women's labor force participation has gained parity with men's and almost half of mothers in opposite-sex marriages contribute 40 percent or more to their household earnings (Fry et al. 2023). This research suggests that persisting gender gaps in childcare time (Sayer 2016) may result in part from cognitive and cultural factors. Since employment and fathering remain "matching arenas", fathers are more likely to view earning an income as sufficient to fulfill their family responsibilities (Garey 1999). Fathers' conceptions of "balance" are thus more likely to reflect and reinforce arrangements that leave routine childcare tasks in a mother's domain regardless of her employment status. Even though fathers' time in childcare has increased over time, their participation is more likely to involve play activities and time spent in shared parenting (Sayer 2016).

On the other hand, employment and mothering remain "oppositional arenas" that continue to compel women to take primary responsibility for both, even when achieving "balance" in such oppositional arenas is an elusive goal at best. Indeed, many mothers described either transitioning to career paths with less room for growth or leaving the workforce altogether to accommodate their caregiving duties. Like prior work showing that the use of work–family reconciliation policies undermines women's promotion chances (Padavic et al. 2020), our research suggests that promoting work–family balance may not result in more domestic equality if most parents and workers continue to conceive of balance in either individualistic or specialized terms.

In addition to gendered conceptions of work–family balance, we also find gendered patterns in how the pandemic influenced parents' satisfaction with their balance. The majority of women who held an individualistic conception reported changes in their satisfaction over the course of the pandemic. Among those who experienced a decline in

satisfaction, individualistic mothers changed their work situation more often than women who held other conceptions as well as more often than men. While it is no surprise that the pandemic created the greatest work–family conflict among employed mothers, it is also noteworthy that the pandemic uncovered and, in some cases, intensified women's frustration with the stalled nature of the gender revolution.

In contrast, those who experienced an improvement in satisfaction began to reevaluate their prior conceptions of what it means to achieve work–family balance. Working from home allowed for the possibility of a more flexible integration of work and family responsibilities, and this experience helped to legitimate demands for their employers to accommodate workers' family needs. Men with individualistic conceptions largely took their partners' increased caregiving responsibilities for granted and thus reported little change in their outlooks or levels of satisfaction.

Compared to women with individualistic conceptions, the women and men with couple-level conceptions were less likely to describe a decline in their satisfaction over the course of the pandemic. For the majority of specialized and egalitarian parents, changes wrought by the pandemic were mostly reconcilable with their preferred couple-centered approaches.

Through interviews with a wide swath of American parents, this work extends existing research on work–family balance. Prior studies have found gendered discourses of work–family balance among respondents in the same organization (e.g., Williams 2018; Padavic et al. 2020) or in the same occupation (e.g., Beddoes and Pawley 2014). Our findings suggest that American parents construct the meaning of "work–family balance" in more diverse ways than previously understood. In addition to the egalitarian, specialized, and individualistic constructions, we find a further distinction between mothers and fathers with individualistic perspectives. This gender difference points to the ways that conceptions of work–family balance help perpetuate inequalities within households and contributes to a gender gap in parental satisfaction. These findings also expand the purview of "work–family balance" beyond employed men and women. Work–family balance is also relevant to those who do not hold a paid job but have partners whose options are constrained by their employment. Indeed, despite the focus on dual-earner couples, no breadwinning and caregiving arrangement is insulated from the intensifying conflicts between work and family responsibilities.

Acknowledging the various ways that contemporary parents conceive of work–family balance points to several avenues for future research. Since we draw on individuals' accounts of how they define balance and perceive how it is enacted in their households, knowing whether their partners' views converge or diverge from their accounts would provide important additional insights. As important, research should explore how people initially form their conceptions of work–family balance and how they either sustain or change their views in response to shifting social circumstances. We also need to know how these conceptions are related to gender ideologies, structural and cultural contexts, and significant life events.

Since our research is based on interviews with partnered heterosexual individuals with children, it is important to ascertain whether and to what degree they reflect the experiences of individuals in other groups. How do unpartnered parents and same-sex couples conceive of work–family balance? With the exception of joint custody arrangements, single parents are unable to espouse a couple-level conception of work–family balance, let alone enact it, but their conceptions may differ from the individualistic conceptions espoused by partnered women with a partner physically present and whose entire income contributes to household finances. Similarly, since same-sex couples cannot fall back on inherited assumptions about gender difference, their conceptions may also vary in unexpected ways. Adding the views of single mothers and fathers as well as same-sex couples to our findings for different-sex couples will provide fruitful insights about whether and how the presence or absence of gendered expectations shapes parents' conceptions of work–family balance, and how, in turn, these conceptions either reinforce or undermine gender inequality. All in

all, our analysis points to the importance of recognizing that the concept of "work–family balance" can have a range of meanings, with consequences that extend well beyond the individual to encompass the challenges facing diverse families and households.

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MDPI AG
Grosspeteranlage 5
4052 Basel
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Tel.: +41 61 683 77 34

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