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He's Working from Home and I'm at Home Trying to Work: Experiences of Childcare and the Work–Family Balance Among Mothers During COVID-19

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Abstract

This article captures mothers' experiences of the work–family balance and division of household labor during the initial COVID-19 lockdown. Interviews were conducted with twenty-five academics and twenty professionals in other fields. Mothers who split childcare with their partners had a more positive experience of the work–family balance during lockdown, compared with mothers who did the majority of the childcare. The present study adds a new wrinkle into the literature on flexibility and work–family balance: the perception of flexibility and its impact on the division of labor. Academic mothers, who had always had highly "flexible" jobs, were less likely to split childcare with their partners pre-pandemic and thus less likely to have positive experiences of work–family balance during the Spring 2020 lockdown. I argue that perceived flexibility of a partner's job affected allocation of childcare

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during the initial stages of the pandemic, a moment that wreaked significant harm on women's careers.

Keywords
childcare, gender and family, household labor, qualitative, work and family, COVID-19

Introduction

The research is clear that women's careers suffer more than men's when becoming parents, not only in terms of career advancement and wage gaps, but also in discriminatory hiring practices. (Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004; Gangl & Ziefle, 2009; Ishizuka, 2021; McIntosh, McQuaid, Munro, & Dabir-Alai, 2012). Outside of the workplace, women in professional careers are still performing a greater share of household tasks and are more likely to experience conflict and role strain around the work–family balance (Blair-Loy, Hochschild, Pugh, Williams, & Hartmann, 2015; Sayer, England, Bittman, & Bianchi, 2009). This can have long-term impacts on their careers as they opt-out or cut their work hours to accommodate family needs. The negative effects of the work–family balance are borne out in the individual's psychological and physical health, performance and satisfaction at work, and family well-being (Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003; Kinnunen, Feldt, Geurts, & Pulkkinen, 2006; Saltzstein, Ting, & Saltzstein, 2001).

The COVID-19 lockdown brought the already precarious work–family balance into direct conflict for many working parents, once again with a greater impact on mothers. Professionals who began working from home during the Spring 2020 lockdown witnessed a merging of their roles as parents and employees—with young children needing constant care and attention, and older children needing assistance with homeschool. Early research has shown us the severe effects the pandemic has had on the careers of working mothers (Collins, Landivar, Ruppanner, & Scarborough, 2020; Heggeness, 2020; Hertz, Mattes, & Shook, 2020; O'Reilly, 2020).

The early months of the pandemic were characterized by high unemployment rates as many sectors of the global economy came to a standstill. While 13% of Americans were unemployed in Spring 2020, mothers were the most likely to make the decision to leave paid work even if their job was still available. According to the National Women's Law Center, 3.5 million mothers left the paid workforce in the early months of the pandemic (Ewing-Nelson & Tucker, 2020). A year into the pandemic, 56% of women were working for pay, the lowest proportion since 1986.

These rates reflect the fact that the burden of childcare fell on women during this period when schools and day care centers were closed. A nationwide, representative survey of 1001 mothers found that 448 had left the paid workforce during the pandemic, and that only 60% of these women were happy with the decision (Miller, 2021). Of mothers who quit their paid jobs, 80% in that sample said that they were the only one who considered quitting, their partner did not. For heterosexual couples, this means women were the ones who left the paid workforce, and that the idea that a male partner would be the one to leave paid work to take over childcare was not even considered. (Miller, 2021).

The present study sampled mothers of young children, aged newborn through 5 years. We focused on mothers of younger children because school aged children required supervision of virtual classes in addition to the usual demands of parenting and domestic work. According to the Department of Labor, age of children mattered for whether or not mothers left the workforce. Mothers of preschool aged children were slightly more likely to stop working for pay during the pandemic (9%) compared with 8% of mothers with children aged 6–12, and just 1% of mothers with teenage children (Chun-Hoon, 2021).

This paper utilizes interview data from forty-five mothers who were working from home while parenting young children during the Spring 2020 lockdown. All of the mothers in this study were living with the father of their children, allowing for an analysis of how the gendered division of labor in the home played out during this unique and stressful moment. Twenty-five of the mothers were in academic positions, and the remaining twenty were in other professional careers. While the COVID-19 pandemic has gone on for over a year, these interviews were collected in late Spring and Summer 2020 and were meant to capture experiences of the initial shock.

I argue that while the work–family balance was thrown into disarray for everyone, some mothers had more positive experiences related to their family or improved work–family balance. The interviews reveal that the arrangement of childcare in the home had an important influence on the mother's satisfaction with work and family during this period. If women were acting as primary caregivers throughout the workday, they were less likely to feel positively about family experiences during the Spring 2020 lockdown, but if they were splitting care with their partner or had other assistance, they felt more able to fulfill their roles as employee and parent and feel more positively about both. As the findings show, professional mothers who were not academics were much more likely to be splitting childcare with their partners during the workday and were therefore more likely to have a positive experience of family or work–family balance during the initial lockdown.

I hypothesized that the key factor in whether or not mothers were splitting care with their partners, and thus having a more positive experience of family, was the perceived flexibility of the mother's job. This research asks the following questions: How did mothers navigate staying at home and performing childcare during the Spring 2020 lockdown? And does the perceived flexibility of their jobs ultimately affect their work–family balance? The sample here is split among academics with highly flexible jobs (outside of teaching courses), and professionals who are more likely to have weekly or even daily deadlines at work. The nature of this sample allows us to examine whether or not perceived flexibility influenced a partner's likelihood of splitting childcare.

Literature

The Work–Family Balance

In her seminal piece on the subject, Joan C. Williams (1996) identified two major, conflicting norms in American society. The first norm was the idea that the nuclear family should be the main provider of childcare; while the second norm focused on the workplace, that the "ideal worker" would be available to work fulltime, including overtime, throughout their career and would not have any interruptions due to childcare responsibilities or other outside demands. The totalizing nature of both of these norms makes it impossible to occupy both simultaneously. Williams noted at the time that these conflicting norms disproportionately impacted women.

The commitment and long hours that institutions expect from the "ideal worker," necessarily bleed into personal life, making it difficult to balance the demands of work and family or as Voydanoff (2004) explained: "participation in one role is more difficult because of participation in the other role" (p. 399). The conflict of these two roles is often referred to as the work–life or work–family balance, and overly demanding work creates conflict in this balance (Berg, Kalleberg, & Appelbaum, 2003; Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2006). Some researchers have also identified family-to-work conflict where family needs affect workplace productivity. Individuals with young children or children with higher needs were most likely to experience family-to-work conflict, and this was reported most frequently among mothers (Lewis, Kagan, & Heaton, 2000; Stevens, Minnotte, Mannon, & Kiger, 2007). Professional and personal lives come into such a degree of conflict that there are workshops, life coaches, and even phone apps all geared toward achieving the perfect "work-life balance."

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) understood work–family imbalance as role conflict. Occupying the dual roles of parent and full-time employee creates strain for the individual, as the requirements and demands of one role can affect their performance of the other. The more invested an individual is in one of the two roles, the more strain is experienced in the other role. According to their theory, an individual whose self-concept is strongly rooted in work would experience more conflict within the family, and vice versa. Among work-oriented parents, this can lead to feelings of inadequacy as mothers or fathers when their work interferes with childcare or domestic tasks. Based on the highly gendered socialization around family roles, work-oriented mothers are much more likely to experience this feeling of being a "bad mom."

Using data from over 200 qualitative interviews with parents, Cinnamon and Rich (2002) argued that mothers experience the family-to-work imbalance as problematic, but expected. The work-to-family imbalance—occurring when employment demands affect childcare, domestic duties, and relationships—was viewed more negatively and more likely to be viewed as a conflict for mothers (Nomaguchi, Milkie, & Bianchi, 2005). Other studies have confirmed that mothers, more than fathers, will switch careers or reduce their hours if they are feeling overwhelmed by the combination of work and family (Kaufman & Uhleberg, 2000).

During the Spring 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, any semblance of "balance" was turned on its head. Suddenly, work and family duties coexisted in time and space—an experience that was new for many. For professional working mothers currently in relationships with male partners, experiences of this sudden collapsing of roles may have been affected by the flexibility (or perceived flexibility) of their jobs and the influence this had on arrangements of childcare.

Flexibility

Widespread use of the internet and tele-conferencing have opened up the possibility for working from home or more flexible work hours, and American workers were increasingly taking advantage of these opportunities pre-pandemic. A report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics revealed that in 2017–18, 25% of American wage and salary workers were at least occasionally able to work from home. More than half of American workers (57%) reported having a flexible schedule, one in which they could vary their start and end work times for the day or choose the location where they work from (The Economics Daily: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

Previous research suggests that this flexibility can be beneficial for both the employer and the employee. On the employee end, flexible work schedules can lead to less stress, better health outcomes over time, and a more favorable work–family balance (Golden & Veiga, 2005; Kelly et al., 2011; Moen et al., 2011). Findings indicate that flexibility in the amount of hours worked and also the start and end times of the workday can help facilitate a better work–life balance; flexibility of working location was also found to be beneficial (Gallie & Russell, 2009; Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). But flexibility at work is not a boon for all. As we will see, the experience can be gendered and career path matters, too. In certain jobs, flexibility of work schedules and locations can be a detriment. The two serious disadvantages of flexible work are (1) often an increased total number of work hours and (2) less barriers around working hours leading to more interruptions in the work–family balance.

Blair-Loy, 2009 conducted a study about work–family conflict among stockbrokers based on the flexibility of their schedules but also the increasingly 24/7 nature of their field brought on by the globalization of financial markets and widespread internet access. Her findings suggested that, with constant demands by clients, flexibility simply meant that the workday did not end. In this case, flexibility caused more tensions in the work–family balance; less conflict was reported by stockbrokers who had more rigid daily schedules.

Utilizing the 2010 European Social Survey, Hofäcker and König (2013) examined the effects of flexibility on work–life conflict or how work requirements impacted family life. The researchers focused on the following survey questions: How often do you… "keep worrying about work problems when not working"; "feel too tired after work to enjoy things one would like to do at home"; and "find that their job prevents them from giving the time to partner or family." Respondents were able to answer on a 1–5 Likert scale from never to always. Based on these measures, they found that 59% of respondents were experiencing a work–family conflict with no significant differences around gender for these questions. Similar to Blair-Loy, 2009, they found that working hours outside of the usual 9-to-5 workday created more tensions in the work–family balance.

The problem of losing the 9–5 workday boundaries are especially important in the context of academia. Rafnsdóttir and Heijstra (2013) refer to the flexibility of academia as a "double-edged sword." Studying academics in Iceland, they found that the increased flexibility of the academic profession prolonged the work day as academics are expected to be available for much longer hours than the 9 to 5 workday: responding to student emails, preparing classes, grading, and writing can (and sometimes must) be done outside of the typical work day. In their study, academics reported a difficulty in disengaging from their work, creating more tensions in the work–family balance. They found that an unregulated workday was problematic for academics: "The flexibility and the freedom to work 'whenever and wherever', is also the most negative aspect" (Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013, p. 7).

In a case study of Scandinavian employees with varying degrees of work flexibility, Pedersen and Jeppesen (2012) echoed others that flexible work schedules could be beneficial *if* the employee practiced a high level of boundary management. It is thus not just the flexibility of the job itself, but the individual worker's ability to segment their work and personal lives. In the present study, nearly all of the academics reported working hours outside of 9 to 5, while that was much less common among professionals. The boundary management seemed to be lower for academics. In general, the “flexibility” afforded by the academic career track created more tensions in the work–family balance, relative to other professional occupations.

Even the positive aspects of flexible work vary by gender. Research has shown that women use flexible hours to spend more time in domestic and childcare duties, while men tend to use flexibility to work longer hours in order to make more money. Thus, flexible work schedules can actually reify traditional gender norms, potentially adding more tension to the work–family balance (Craig & Powell, 2011; White, Hill, McGovern, Mills, & Smeaton, 2003).

Work flexibility can be beneficial *when* there are strong boundaries around work time and clear deadlines. The pitfalls of flexibility include more interruptions in the work–family balance and more hours in the workday. The pandemic has perhaps exposed a new disadvantage of workplace flexibility. When it comes to parenting, one partner’s perceptions of the other’s workplace flexibility may act as a justification to unequally split childcare duties.

Division of Labor in the Home

In 1989, Hochschild and Machung reported on the “second shift”, or the domestic work and childcare that women perform in addition to working full time. Over thirty years ago, Hochschild and Machung’s research demonstrated that the women’s liberation movement landed more women in the workforce, but it did not change the gender inequity in the home. Since then, countless studies, including some from the original authors, have tracked the status of the second shift. Researchers have found that because of the second shift, mothers have less leisure time (Milkie, Raley, & Bianchi, 2009) and are more stressed (Dugan & Barnes Farrell, 2020). While it can have some benefits for the work–family conflict, scheduling flexibility alone is not enough to combat the overwhelming burden of second shift (Wharton, 1994). Follow up studies have overwhelmingly reported that the second shift persists (Blair-Loy et al., 2015; Sayer et al., 2009).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, labor force participation rate in 2019 was 72.3% for mothers with children under 18, and 66.4% for mothers with children under age 6. Despite these high rates of participation, the 2019 American Time Use Survey revealed that women spend 19.67 hours per week in housework and caring for household members, while men spent only 11.97 hours per week (American Time Use Survey, 2019). This narrowing of the gender gap is due not only to men’s increased time spent in domestic labor, but also a decrease in the time that women are spending in cooking, cleaning, and childcare (Sayer, 2005). The COVID-19 pandemic has increased this unequal division of labor. According to a survey of 3000 people in the US and Europe, women are spending 15 hours more in domestic labor than men are (Savage, 2020). The 2020 "Women in the Workplace" study found that number to be closer to 20 hours per week (LeanIn.org, 2020).

The second shift is still alive and well for American women. During the global pandemic of the coronavirus and the ensuing lockdown, mothers who previously worked outside the home saw the first and second shifts confront each other. Suddenly both shifts needed to be done simultaneously, and many more hours needed to be devoted to childcare, as outside sources of care essentially disappeared for several weeks. As we will hear from the mothers in this study, the COVID-19 lockdown fused these roles throughout the day, calling work–family "balance" into question. While this situation was less than ideal for all, the nature of the childcare arrangement in the home (the degree to which care was shared among multiple people) impacted mothers' experiences. I propose that the perceived flexibility of the mother's job affected the care arrangement.

Methodology

This paper is part of a larger research project, the Smart-Mama study, where the social effects of the COVID-19 crisis are explored through the lens of domestic rearrangements of parenting duties due to the increase in remote working during the lockdown in US and Italy. This paper focuses only on the American sample, including 25 interviews with academic mothers and 20 interviews with mothers who are professionals in other fields. I focused on mothers of children who were not yet in kindergarten, as the educational requirement for children in grade school added another layer of complexity to childcare under lockdown. Because this research is concerned with the gendered division of labor in the home, I interviewed individuals who were currently in a heterosexual relationship and living with a male partner. All of the participants in this sample identified as women.

The majority of women in the sample identified as white or white ethnic (62.2%), 15.5% of the women identified as African American, Black, or Afro Latina; 13.3% identified as Asian or Asian-American; 4.4% were Hispanic; and 4.4% of respondents were Middle Eastern. The 25 "academic mothers" in this sample included tenure-track, tenured, and non–tenure-track faculty, full-time lecturers, and graduate students. Part-time or adjunct professors were not included in this research. The 20 professionals included lawyers, administrators, teachers, data analysts, engineers, and people from non-profit and entertainment industries.

Sampling for this study consisted of identifying women who posted content on Twitter about working from home as a mother; recruiting through parenting groups on social media; and contacting personal networks of academics and professionals. The bulk of the interviews were conducted in

April, May, and June of 2020, with 10 additional interviews taking place in August 2020. These interviews were conducted over tele-conferencing applications and lasted approximately 30 minutes, on average. Pseudonyms are used for all of the names in this sample, and any identifying information has been omitted.

Participants were asked about their daily work and childcare schedules before COVID-19 and during the Spring 2020 lockdown. They were also asked to share information about their sources of emotional support, as well as positive and negative experiences of the lockdown. A full list of interview questions is provided at the end of this article. All of the women in this sample were engaged in fulltime, paid work before the pandemic. The respondents were not asked to report the exact number of hours they worked per week before and during the pandemic, but none of the respondents claimed to be dedicating the same number of hours to work that they had been before the lockdown.

Participants were also asked about childcare arrangement before and during the lockdown (see Tables 3 and 4). Pre-pandemic, the majority of the children in these households were enrolled in full time day care, preschool, or other childcare settings outside of the home. Three of the non-academic professionals had husbands who were staying home with children before the pandemic, either full time or at least during the mother's workday (with one husband going to work in the evening after the mother returned home). None of the academic women had husbands who were primary childcare givers before the pandemic.

Results

Work–Family Balance

The constraints and the collapsing of work and family life were hard for everyone during the lockdown, especially for parents. According to both academic and popular accounts—this period has been worse for mothers (Collins et al., 2020; Cooper, 2020; Heggeness, 2020; Hertz et al., 2020; Kibbe, 2020; Long, 2021; Miller, 2021). Participants in this study recalled

Table 1. Most Positive Moments of Spring 2020 Lockdown.

	Work	Kids/ Family	Work–family balance	Domestic tasks	Self-care
Academics	10 (40%)	8 (32%)	4 (16%)	1 (4%)	2 (8%)
Professionals	3 (15%)	9 (45%)	6 (30%)	1 (5%)	1 (5%)
	13 (29%)	17 (38%)	10 (22%)	2 (4%)	3 (6%)

many challenging experiences, but they were also asked to share their most positive moment from the lockdown (See Table 1). Responses ranged from some specific memory of time spent with their family members (38%), a work accomplishment (29%), a general improved work–family balance (22%), making time for self-care (6%), or feeling good about the completion of domestic tasks (4%). Sixty percent of all respondents noted general or specific moments with their families or an improved work–family balance as a highlight during the lockdown, while only 29% mentioned a work accomplishment. However, when we break these answers down between job types—academic or non-academic professionals—we see a stark contrast. Seventy-five percent of non-academics focused on family or work–family balance as a positive outcome of the lockdown, compared with only 48% of academics; while academics were much more likely (40%) to note a work accomplishment, compared with other professionals (15%). Within the 48% of academics who focused on positive moments involving family or work–family balance, nearly half had either a partner who was splitting childcare or full-time help from another family member, a point I will return to later.

Working professionals were more likely to mention either "kids/family" or "work-family balance" as their most positive moments from the Spring 2020 lockdown. Jacqueline, a patient care specialist who splits childcare throughout the day with her husband noted benefits to working remotely: "it's nice to be around and see my older son explore nature...with my regular work schedule I wouldn't have been able to see as much." Fiona, an academic advisor who is also splitting care with her partner, is considering getting a job that is permanently remote so that she can spend more time with her daughter: "I would love to be home with her and watch her grow up, not miss things. As chaotic as it is, I would love to continue to work from home." As a teacher who is also splitting care with her partner, Gretchen is happy at how the time together has changed her relationship with her daughter: "I've had to be more creative in my play with my daughter and it also made me feel more connected to her."

Three-quarters of the professionals in this sample expressed similar sentiments about feeling closer to their children and families or having a better balance with work than before. In contrast, most academics believed that their

Table 2. Arrangement of Childcare During Spring 2020 Lockdown.

	Primary caretaker	Arranged split care	Partner is primary care	Babysitter/ Nanny	Family help
Academics	12 (48%)	3 (12%)	3 (12%)	3 (12%)	4 (16%)
Professionals	2 (10%)	8 (40%)	7 (35%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)
	14 (31%)	11 (24%)	10 (22%)	5 (11%)	5 (11%)

work–family balance became worse during the pandemic. Academics were more likely to be performing the bulk of the childcare than their professional counterparts (see Table 2) and were also more likely to mention feeling stressed about their “failure” to complete work commitments. Only 16% of academics mentioned a balance between work and family as a positive aspect of the lockdown, for the majority, the work–family balance was more likely to come up as a conflict—a feeling of wearing different hats with varying degrees of success. When academics did discuss a silver-lining related to family, it was often followed by an acknowledgment that this was at the expense of their careers.

Academic mothers complained that as childcare and work responsibilities clashed in Spring 2020, they did not have the time or energy to devote to their intellectual pursuits beyond teaching (Minello, Martucci, & Manzo, 2020). As a result, positive comments about time with children or family were usually tempered with a comment about how this was negatively affecting their careers. Abigail, a PhD student, identified some moments with her children as a point that felt good during the lockdown: “I feel good when it’s quiet and everyone is engaged...those are moments that feel really good as a mother ...but my whole identity isn’t just as a mother.” Abigail, who studies public health, was frustrated that she was “falling behind” at a crucial time in her PhD program and during a public health crises that she desperately wanted to study. Like Abigail, Cindy, a tenure-track professor, knows that her career is taking a backseat even when she does appreciate the time spent with her kids: “I have gotten to experience my son taking his first steps, my daughter seeing a lot of curiosity about reading...I do appreciate the time I get with my children, but I have to block out the career aspirations and not think about that.” Olivia is already tenured but has struggled to publish since the birth of her son, who was five years old during the lockdown. She is happy about the time she has spent with him: “This is a time when I can really teach [my son] something about independent thinking...and I have fun with that.” But as for her career: “Maybe I will never be able to do it, maybe I should think about quitting and doing something else.”

Less likely to note positive moments related to family, 40% of academics instead focused on work accomplishments, despite having far fewer hours to devote to work. Yet, the mothers admitted that most of these stated accomplishments would have been completely routine in any other semester—finishing teaching a class, meeting students via zoom, and guest lecturing; as opposed to a conference presentation or a publication that might normally be a highlight. This underscores the particular struggle of academic mothers during this lockdown: that their work accomplishments were self-admittedly less significant than usual, and they were less likely to identify positive aspects of their personal family lives.

Many of the professionals in this sample had jobs that allowed for flexible work *times* meaning that they could finish up some of their work in the evening after children were asleep, but they still had daily or weekly deadlines for most of their work. For academics, deadlines are usually only related to teaching, not writing or research. In this case, too much flexibility around research and writing was disadvantageous—it meant that their partners (and sometimes the academic mothers themselves) viewed their work as less urgent meaning it often didn't get done. The flexibility led to them being the default parent for childcare, but the lack of time to work on research and writing also affected their confidence in their identities as academics. Prioritizing domestic work over their career goals, academic mothers during the lockdown also began to feel guilty that they were not able to enjoy the moment of being home with their children. Thus, the overwhelming demands of motherhood and academia negatively affected both identities, these women rarely spoke of an improved work/life balance under lockdown.

Flexibility

Of the twenty-five academics in the study, eleven explicitly mentioned the "flexibility" of their jobs as a justification for taking on more of the childcare during the Spring 2020 lockdown. Among professionals, flexibility explicitly only came up twice, once in reference to a partner's work that could be completed in intervals throughout the day and once in reference to a better life balance due to the flexibility of online work. As shown in Table 2 , academic mothers were much more likely to take on more childcare than the professional mothers. For many of the academic mothers, their jobs were seen as more flexible than their partner's jobs before the lockdown leading them to be the default "on call" parent staying home with a sick child or leaving work early to pick kids up from daycare. During the lockdown, this flexibility meant that academic mothers in this sample were doing the majority of childcare in their homes and were responsible for more childcare than mothers in non-academic, professional careers. The table shows that 48% of academic mothers were the main caretaker during the lockdown, compared with only 10% of other professionals. Of professional mothers, 75% either split care with their partners or had partners who were the primary caretaker, compared with only a quarter of academic mothers.

Jen is a tenure-track professor and mother of a then 6-month-old child, and her husband is a real estate agent. Jen's husband, a real estate agent, was primarily working from home before the lockdown. In April and May of 2020, his work as a realtor slowed, and he used the extra time do trainings and classes online. Although he was home during the lockdown, she was still doing the bulk of the childcare. Jen was supposed to be working on her book in the Spring while finishing her maternity leave, her child was supposed to be in daycare by mid-March. She worried what her work will look like in the fall when she goes back to teaching full time. She felt hesitant about sending her child to daycare but was also concerned that her husband would not step up to do more of the childcare. Even though both of their jobs are technically flexible when it comes to hours:

> "… in theory we can work with each other to kind of piece together childcare and work, but like in practice I think we both start to feel gipped like 'I need more time'. I need to have structured blocks and I don't think it's going to work very well. We'll see what happens, but based on how things have been so far, I don't think it's going to work."

Charlotte, a tenured professor and mother of a 2-year-old said that before the lockdown, her child was in daycare 5 days a week, and that she would do about 75% of the drop offs and pickups from school. Charlotte would also be the one to stay home with her child if they were sick and could not go to daycare: "my husband works at the university, but his job is a lot less flexible… that meant I had to be home." During the lockdown, the perceived flexibility of her job translated into her doing the bulk of the childcare, 80% in her estimation: "he still basically works a regular work day, which means I have our toddler." The same was true for Cindy, a professor and mother of two children under three. Before the lockdown, both children were enrolled in a fulltime daycare, 7–4:30 every day, but "If a child gets sick it usually falls on me because I have the 'flexible' job."

This defaulting of fulltime care because of flexibility was a source of resentment for many participants. Olivia, a tenured professor and mother of a five-year-old, discussed how the flexibility made her the "loser" in the household division of labor. "...He has less flexibility than I do during this time. Other than teaching I have a lot of flexibility and now with classes online I have more flexibility. I have more flexibility so I'm the loser in this." Natalie, a tenure-track professor, shares a similar sentiment:

> "we were just passing them back and forth for the day, whoever had a break would pass them off…this disadvantages me because, you know, with teaching and writing...we can always delay that a bit...so I'm probably doing 60–70% of the daytime childcare."

Lorna, a tenure-track professor and mother of two confesses: "I'm the point parent for a lot during the day because of the 'flexibility' of my job." Farah was 9 months pregnant during the lockdown and also has a four-year-old child. She reported that her husband was generally involved with childcare but "...he had more of a commitment to be at work for other people, my work was independent. I could be more flexible." During the workday, "[My daughter] would come to me for attention, every 20 minutes." When the lockdown first began, Angela, a PhD student and mother of a five-year-old, was still teaching two classes, completing two fellowships, and had a writing deadline for her dissertation. She says there was more of a schedule then, but now that her semester is over and her husband, a high school teacher, is still in class, she is with her son most of the day: “Because there’s no schedule for me right now, I default to being the primary caregiver...before it was more like both of us responding to immediate needs...putting out fires everyday.” As noted above, Angela fears that her ability to finish her PhD in a timely manner will be affected by this unexpected disruption.

For academics, the “flexibility” of their jobs meant that during the Spring 2020 lockdown, they would record lectures in the evenings and join meetings around their children’s sleep schedules, but for the most part their research and writing was not getting done. For tenure-track professors, this threatens their potential for tenure, and for graduate students, it means that their dissertations are falling by the way-side. Flexible work schedules are championed as improving the work/life balance, but as the previous literature and the present findings suggest, the actual benefits of flexibility are debatable and seem to have a negative impact for academics, particularly during this unique time.

In contrast, many of the women in this sample who were professionals outside academia considered the newfound flexibility of work to be a silver lining of the pandemic. For these women, their workdays, or at least deadlines, were more bounded, and they were far less likely to be the sole or primary caretakers of children. As a result, they were more likely to note benefits to their work/life balance compared with academics.

During the lockdown, Anya, a non-profit director, split childcare with her husband throughout the day. With their commutes removed, they were able to enjoy spending extra family time before the workday started and then alternated work and childcare shifts until the evening. Dongmei, whose parents were watching her children during work hours, loved that she could slip away throughout the workday, something that had been impossible when they were in daycare: “I can step away for 5 or 10 minutes to help my daughter with something…if I miss my baby, I can go give him a hug and a kiss.”

Many of the professional women had husbands who were taking part in regular childcare pre-pandemic and in the initial lockdown phase. Paula, a lawyer with a 2-year-old, needed to block off specific times for meetings, but otherwise found that she could complete her work at her own pace and felt happy to be more involved with day-time childcare which had previously been solely done by her husband. Maya found a better work life balance in general: “I had to recalibrate…and then I realized I needed to pause…I take breaks with my son during the day, I did a pilates class in the middle of the day, things that are good for me, that actually fill me up.” Jada, who splits care with her husband, has also found an improved work/life balance and says this about the flexibility: “I can do work on my own time, I’m not scheduled into things that need to happen at a certain time, as long as I get things in every week…"

Most academics had a negative framing of their job's flexibility, it was a condition that they and their partners used to justify the mothers' roles as primary caretakers. Professionals rarely used the word "flexible," but they noted that there were more opportunities to achieve a positive work/life balance during the lockdown than before. Much of this came down to the arrangement of childcare in the household, which I argue was affected by perceived flexibility of work before the pandemic. While participants were not explicitly asked about how they negotiated childcare with their partners, patterns emerged between the academics and professionals in terms of the household arrangement of childcare. The final section considers the arrangement of childcare with a focus on women who were primary caregivers, nearly all of whom were academics.

The Arrangement of Childcare

All of the mothers in this study were currently married or in relationships with their children's fathers. One academic mother had moved in with her parents because her husband continued working in a hospital. Other than this one case, all of the mothers were living with their partners during the lockdown. The minority of families in this sample had outside help via live-in nannies or a local babysitter (11%), and the same amount had grandparents or other family members living with them during the lockdown (11%). The majority of the sample (78%) were households where only the parents were providing childcare during the lockdown period. For much of the sample, the lockdown period was the first time that parents were home with their children full-time since their period of leave after their child's birth. This meant that most of the couples in this sample had to navigate childcare and work schedules in an unprecedented way, but the flexibility inherent in academic careers may have diminished academic mothers' ability to advocate for their time.

The benefits of flexible work schedules were called into question in the previous section, especially for academics and uniquely so during the pandemic. But the patterns that were exaggerated during the pandemic were already present before. Pre–COVID-19, academic mothers reported being the parent to take off work when a child was sick or leave work early to do daycare pickup. During the pandemic, these mothers also reported doing the bulk of the childcare while their partners focused on their workdays. In families with non-academic, professional mothers, these emergency events were more likely to be negotiated in a way that parents took turns.

In Tables 3 and 4, we see the arrangements of childcare responsibilities before the pandemic and in Spring 2020. Fathers were much more likely to be involved in daily childcare responsibilities pre-pandemic when mothers were

Table 3. Childcare Arrangements in Households with Non-Academic, Professional Mothers.

	Primary caretaker	Arranged split care with partner	Partner is primary caretaker	Full time daycare[a]	Family help	Other[b]
Pre- pandemic	0	1 (5%)	3 (15%)	9 (45%)	3 (15%)	4(20%)
Spring 2020	2 (10%)	8 (40%)	7 (35%)	2 (10%)	1 (5%)	0

[a] Preschool, nannies, babysitters, etc.
[b] Including a combination of daycare + partner care, split care, or family.

Table 4. Childcare Arrangements in Households with Academic Mothers.

	Primary caretaker	Arranged split care with partner	Partner is primary caretaker	Full-time daycare[a]	Family help	Other[b]
Pre-pandemic	2 (8%)	2 (8%)	0	19 (78%)	0	2 (8%)
Spring 2020	12 (48%)	3 (12%)	3 (12%)	3 (12%)	4 (16%)	0

[a] Preschool, nannies, babysitters, etc.
[b] Including a combination of daycare + partner care, split care, or family.

non-academic professionals. Forty percent of fathers paired with professionals were providing full or part time childcare, sometimes supplemented with daycare (see column "other"). This level of childcare by the father was only the case in three (12%) of the academic families.

The alleviation of caregiving duties during the lockdown was an important contributing factor to a mother's satisfaction with family or the work–family balance under lockdown. However, for many academic women, their partner would work largely uninterrupted during the day and often in a designated office space, a "room of one's own" which the mothers typically did not have.

Academic mothers consistently noted that their husbands would go to those offices during the day, maybe taking breaks for lunch, but working a full 7–8 hours in relative seclusion.

Farah, the PhD student mentioned above noted: "I could be more flexible [than him], because of that he would shut his door to his office and that's when it would be disproportionately me." Amy referred to her husband's job as "pretty full on…When he's working from home…he needs to be attentive to that. I would say I get minimal support [from him] until late afternoon most days."

Offering evidence of how bounded their partners' workdays were, many mothers shared that their husbands would join the family for lunch breaks.

Lorna's husband was "in his office most of the day until 4pm, except for taking a lunch break with the family." The same for Abigail's husband, Abigail shared that her husband, "he's in the basement doing his work in a quiet space, and he'll come up for lunch sometimes…but it's 99% me." Jen was taking care of a newborn during the workday and her husband would: "come out and visit us or take a lunch break but during the day...he was actually working and I was supposed to be taking care of [the baby]."

Like their partners, these women also needed bounded, structured, and uninterrupted chunks of time for work, but because of the perceived flexibility of academia, the burden of childcare fell mainly to them. This arrangement of a husband doing full-time daily work in a separate space was true for only one non-academic professional, who summed it up succinctly: "…he has a separate office with a door... he is working from home and I am at home trying to work."

The mothers in these situations felt that their partners had fundamentally different experiences of the lockdown. The fathers would visit their families for meals, but for the most part they had uninterrupted workdays. This set up was disproportionately more common in families with academic mothers as opposed to other professionals. Ninety percent of the non-academic, professional mothers in this sample were *not* the primary caregiver for the full workday. This not only meant that they were able to get much of their work done, but they were also able to feel more satisfaction around family life or their work–family balance, compared with academic mothers.

Conclusions

When asked about a time they remember as especially positive or a moment when they felt good from Spring 2020, many of respondents initially laughed. To be clear, none of the respondents in this sample thought that working from home with a child was easy or necessarily pleasurable, and few thought it was something that could be desirable or sustainable over the long term. However, there were real differences in the experiences of professional versus academic mothers. Suddenly thrown into a position of fulltime childcare provider, most academic mothers were unable to feel positively about their time with children and their roles as mothers or academics. Daily life became an emergency scenario where they were "putting out fires" and stressed about how they were not getting their work done during the day, often working after their child's bed time. This caused a frustration that rarely allowed these women to enjoy moments with their children and certainly did not provide an improved sense of the work–family balance. For academics, the positive moments were most frequently related to their work, but as mentioned above, these were much smaller "accomplishments" than they would typically single out.

In contrast to the academics, 75% of professionals highlighted a moment with children or an improved work–family balance as a positive moment from Spring 2020. When women did not have to do all of the care, they were better able to balance their work and family duties and were more likely to report enjoying time with their children. That this was so much more frequently the case for professionals than academics is telling. To recall, academics were much more likely to be the primary childcare provider during the early weeks of the pandemic (48% vs. only 10% of other professionals), this at a time when they were navigating the pivot to online teaching and then grading end of semester projects.

The pandemic exacerbated the established disadvantages of workplace flexibility and revealed a new one—when a partner had a flexible job, the other partner's perception of that flexibility contributed to an unfair division of labor in the home. If the academic mother's work *could* be done at all hours, there was a lack of urgency in splitting care during the workday. Pre-pandemic, academic mothers were more likely to be the parent to stay home with a sick child or take care of other emergencies because they had a flexible job. During Spring 2020, these pre-pandemic behaviors may have acted as a precedent that justified their place as primary caregivers. For professionals whose jobs were never flexible, those pre-pandemic emergencies were more likely to be shared between the couple, setting up a better framework for turn-taking during the lockdown.

Other research during the pandemic has pointed out the structural issues that working mothers have faced during the pandemic (Arntz, Ben Yahmed, & Berlingieri, 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Qian & Fuller, 2020), especially the conflicts of academic mothers who have fallen behind in terms of research and publications during the course of the pandemic (Kibbe, 2020; Minello, Martucci, &, Manzo, 2020; Oleschuk, 2020). There is no denying that the pandemic has brought to light the inconsistencies present in the coexisting norms of "ideal worker" and "intensive mother" at societal and structural levels. The findings from this research implore us to also consider the relationships within households that affect a mother's experience of the work–family balance, not just during the pandemic, but at all times. As women continue to take on the bulk of the second shift in straight, parenting partnerships, how do perceptions of the mother's job affect dynamics within the family?

Limitations and Future Research

As with any early studies of a new phenomenon, this research leads us to more questions than answers. While the methodology of this project allowed an indepth glimpse into mothers' experiences, it also resulted in a relatively small sample size. A quantitative project with a sample size in the hundreds or thousands would be useful to test these hypotheses about the relationship between work–family satisfaction, childcare arrangements, and perceived flexibility of a partner's job.

The present findings suggest several avenues to pursue in future research projects. There was an attempt to add a cohort of academic fathers to this research. Using the same sampling methods, 25 academic fathers were contacted—four responded with interest, while only three were eventually interviewed. For context, so many academic mothers wanted to be interviewed that potential participants had to be turned away. This perhaps already speaks to the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on academic mothers as opposed to fathers, but a full study comparing them would be useful. There is also a need to understand the experiences of mothers who were essential and were never working from home during the pandemic, but still needed to navigate the closures of schools and day care. To understand the question of the gendered division of labor within the home, this study focused on mothers who were currently in relationships with men. This research needs to be broadened to single mothers, mothers in relationships without a male partner, and mothers who do not identify as cis-women.

Appendix

Interview Script

1. What was the daily arrangement of childcare before the COVID-19 lockdown?
2. What about now, during the lockdown?
3. What was the day-to-day schedule like for your family before the lockdown? How was that broken up between you and your partner? (probe: day care drop off, food preparation, and evening routines)
4. What about during the lockdown?
5. How do you manage to work? Which strategies do you adopt being at home with everyone?
6. Thinking about emotional support, who have you been relying on for that during COVID-19? (probe: messaging groups, social media, therapy, and family/friends)
7. What do you think will be the long-term consequences for your work in the aftermath of COVID-19? Do you envision a reorganization of your work?
8. I'd like to ask you to reflect on what the most difficult or fearful moment was for you during the lockdown.

9. Can you now describe a positive moment or a time when you felt especially capable?
10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about how you are experiencing the lockdown COVID-19 in general? What are your feelings about it?

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