Coming Up for Air: Motherhood in the Age of the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

Beginning in the Winter of 2019, the coronavirus pandemic took over the world, drastically changing our day-to-day lives. This study focuses on how the pandemic inflated intensive mothering standards, disproportionately affecting women. Prior to the spread of this deadly virus, the majority of childcare demands fell onto the mother. Previous studies have shown that whether she worked in the compensated labor force or made childcare her full-time position, mothers were met with perpetual demands of family life. Now that every aspect of our world has been moved remotely, the amount of work and stress has increased exponentially. This study uses qualitative methods, primarily semi-structured interviews, to gain a better understanding of daily lives for mothers in the age of COVID-19. This research examines conflicting gender roles and stereotypes in an average day at home during the pandemic. These findings are compared to previous literature, including the motherhood mandate, the sociological imagination, and sex role theories regarding the concept of motherhood.
Introduction

Women do it all. Despite the glass ceiling put into place from decades of sexism and misogyny, women have fought long and hard in establishing their role in our modern world. Intersectional feminism has been crucial to how all women, including women of color, trans women, and multi-abled women, are regarded within United States’ culture at large. Since the mid-twentieth century, women have made strides in the professional workforce. As more and more women obtain higher levels of education, in numbers far surpassing those of men, the sphere of professional and skilled labor has been revolutionized, however many of these successes have only been experienced by White women. Although the assumptions of women’s achievements have advanced, the socialized expectations of women within the home have not wavered. A woman can work, but her home needs to be organized, her partner happy, and the children cared for. She is expected to balance both roles seamlessly without letting her frustrations show. Since the 1900s, when middle-class women began to pursue work outside their homes, women have battled role conflict as they attempt to balance the rewards and consequences of being a working parent (Russo 1976). Even in 2021, after years of protests and legal reformation meant to assist working mothers, these challenges remain – now, under new and extreme circumstances.

I have always had a front row seat to the performance of motherhood. As the oldest child, I would watch my mother in the kitchen, flustered in her pant suit as she kicked off her heels while standing over the stove. At fourteen, I started working for friends of my family, going over to their houses at night to make sure the kids slept without disturbance while their parents went out for dinner. Those late nights, when I was paid ten dollars to sit on a couch and raid someone

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1 This research looks predominately at White and heterosexual women. This was not my intention, but simply based on the participants who connected with me in time to be interviewed.
else’s pantry, were my first glances into the challenges of childcare. Now, at twenty-two, I take on more responsibilities in others’ homes: taking children to respective pod-activities, making dinner, folding laundry, playing dress-up and hide-and-go-seek. The use of a babysitter is often a necessity for working mothers, especially in today’s chaotic climate. Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, my phone has been flooded with requests from mothers asking for assistance. Thus, the idea for this research emerged.

Since March of 2020, childcare has had a greater impact on parents’ lives. When it was announced that schools and businesses were to close, masks needed to be worn, and people needed to isolate themselves in their homes, mothers and fathers needed to adjust their routines to complement the new “normal.” I met Sasha in the summer of 2020, after introducing myself as an experienced sitter on a Facebook page dedicated to mothers in a town neighboring my own. “It takes a village! But I can’t really see my village right now,” she said, in her soft voice as we Facetimed each other from our respective dining rooms. Sasha, a medical researcher, and her husband, a financial analyst for a hedge fund, relied on their family for childcare before the pandemic. Since Sasha’s parents and in-laws are older in age, she did not feel comfortable putting them at risk as she intended to send her children to in-person school in the fall. So, I agreed to step in as her children’s caretaker during the day. We would wear masks, keep each other up to date on our health, and wash our hands religiously. Sasha and her husband were thankful as my presence in their home would alleviate the stresses of necessary childcare during the pandemic.

This research will examine the very problem Sasha faced: How the 2019 coronavirus pandemic is affecting working and stay-at-home mothers. Throughout U.S. history, women have been expected to bear children. While these constraints have definitely lessened over time, there
are still lingering pressures directed at women to become mothers. To be considered a successful mother, she is held to the impossible standards of intensive mothering that restrict a woman’s autonomy, in both her personal and professional life.² “Although most Americans recognize that certain aspects of mothering follow from socially developed ideas, many also believe that other aspects should be sacred, inviolable, or at least commonsensical and that they follow from the natural propensities of mothers or the absolute needs of children” (Hays 1996:X). This research examines how intensive mothering standards have shaped working and stay-at-home mother’s experiences in COVID-19, as mothers are feeling an inordinate amount of pressure to scale back from work or leave indefinitely due to the all-consuming demands of parenting. It is the effects on these mothers that may lead them to reconsider their occupations outside of their homes. Once an employee leaves the professional world, it is harder to re-enter their occupation. This stress is even greater for women. Many working mothers are hesitant to share their struggles with their employers for fear of losing their positions or being negatively critiqued. While mothers like Sasha have hired babysitters and nannies to mend the emotional care gap, the ability to outsource such resources is a privilege. Within the United States, economic frailty is at an all-time high, and the ability to hire childcare has become more of a burden to the average family.

Through semi-structured interviews, I explore the complicated dichotomy mothers are facing in the years 2020 and 2021. Through these conversations, it is clear that COVID-19 has intensified the already complicated balancing act of motherhood and economic professionalism.

Throughout this paper, sociological gender-performance theory and previous social science

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² In the updated version of her monumental work, The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home, Hochschild (2012) illustrated her life as working mother within a university. In bringing her child into her office and struggling with outsourced care it was clear to Hochschild that the university microcosm was still designed for men and their homes for their wives. “The career woman pays a cost by entering a clockwork of careers that permits little time or emotional energy to raise a family. Her career permits so little of these because it was originally deigned to suit a traditional man hose wife raised his children” (Hochschild 2012:23).
studies inform my attempts to analyze the multiple responses provided by my participants. Because of the convoluted and multi-layered expectations American women are expected to meet, motherhood in the age of COVID has become a troublesome and often overwhelming experience. Even for mothers with a great deal of socio-economic privilege, the pandemic has left mothers, working and stay-at-home, depleted and exhausted.

**Literature Review**

Before dissecting the intricacies of gender performance theory and how it presents itself in the distribution of household labor before and during a pandemic, I feel it is important to identify intensive mothering in its simplest form. Intensive mothering (Hays 1996) is the belief, held by many Americans, that the mother should be the most active model in her children’s life. These responsibilities include feeding, cleaning, teaching, supervising, healing, and reprimanding (Hays 1996). Never mind the father or other parental figures, the mother is expected to devote her entire being to the prosperity of her children. Intensive mothering would not exist without what Russo (1976) identified as the motherhood mandate. “Through sex-role socialization, women as well as men develop expectations about what women can or cannot do, and these expectations get built into operating principles of society’s institutions” (Russo 1976:145). This theory implies the ultimate goal of womanhood: to raise well-adjusted children. Failure to do so would signify failure at her gender performance.

*Understanding Gender Theory and Performance Within the Nuclear Family*

Although COVID is a modern pandemic, its effects on gender dynamics within the home can be explained through a long history of gendered expectations and symbolism. Leslie McCall (1992) identified the “durable cultural expressions of cultural differences” in contemplating
Bourdieu’s theory of social order in relation to feminism. These expressions “represent the persistence of hegemonic binary oppositions in core gender identity (male/female, masculine/feminine)” (McCall 1992:837). This explanation of gender-binary difference can be used in categorizing mothers’ and fathers’ responsibilities, which are further shaped by society’s expectations of woman/motherhood. Elizabeth Silva’s (2005) writing complements this point in her explication of Bourdieu’s social and culture capital theory. She analyzed the social functions of “legitimating social differences [which] establishes that [gender difference] is produced… as well as consumed in certain legitimate areas sanctioned by culture” (Silva 2005:84). Silva states that solidifying women as mothers and home-keepers plays a crucial role in the perpetuation of cultural expectations of women. “Bourdieu sees the family as a key site for performing the ‘labor of eternalization’ as the structure of the sexual division maintains masculine domination” (Silva 2005:96). Both Silva and McCall support their arguments through Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, or the norms and values of any given social group. Western nations hold strong societal expectations that women should shoulder the majority of childcare, which hinders her ability to perform well in other societal and personal aspects. This expectation is observed by the younger generations within a given home as “early upbringings encourage boys and girls to enter the games of particular social dispositions very unequally” (Silva 2005:94). Thus, gender performance patterns are perpetuated and become harder to challenge.

In an attempt to understand the conservation of these roles, despite their damaging effects on both women and men, Scott Coltrane (2010) suggests determining micro- and macro-

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3 When identifying horticultural societies, Ernestine Friedl (1978) explained how when women bring home an equal number of resources for their family, their status within a given culture is equal to that of men. She explained how these ideas are similar to women’s stratification within a more modern, U.S. context. “When women who bring in income from jobs are able to function on a more nearly equal basis with their husbands. Women who contribute services to their husbands and children without pay, as of some middle-class Western housewives, are especially vulnerable to dominance” (Friedl 1978:35).

4 Social and cultural capital enables an individual with greater prestige to exert power over others.
perspectives in order to understand how social conditions “affect the distribution of reproductive labor, including cultural gender identities tied to reproducing roles, the class stratification of childcare labor, and its collectivization” (Coltrane 2010:796). Coltrane identifies micro-sociology as relative; the parsing of gender roles is unique to an individual unit. In the macro-sociological form, gender roles are shaped by cultural norms through de facto and de jure rules and principles. Both the micro- and macro-aspects of a woman’s socialized identity result in her inheriting the majority of house/childcare responsibilities. She is structured as the sole care provider through the “patterned repetition of the same types of events happening over and over again, involving many different people spread out across many different locations” (Coltrane 2010:794). Coltrane and the authors mentioned above are very useful in relating Bourdieu’s theories of gender, culture and social capital, and habitus to the pervasive definition of motherhood. In order to understand the concept of motherhood further, it is imperative to specifically define the socialization of motherhood.

The Socialization of Motherhood and The Sociological Imagination of Motherhood

Before a girl is even a woman, let alone a mother, she is socialized to accept the position. Budds et. al. (2017) quote Foucault in their study of intensive mothering and its effects of childhood development. In his 1988 writing, Foucault introduced the “technology of the self” or the “effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, and immortality” (Foucault 1988:18). In relating this definition to motherhood, Budds et. al. clarify that however motherhood affects a given women is directly correlated with how she interacts with her family.
As children, women are taught to be the more sensitive gender⁵ “a sentiment that experts say could stem from cultural beliefs that play into longstanding stereotypes that women should be more empathic and compassionate than men” (Kramer 2020:1). Throughout Kramer’s (2020) research she is clear in the teachings of motherhood. Parents spoke of raising “good” people, “good,” meaning the ability to understand others’ challenges and how they can be helpful in meeting obstacles. Both mothers and fathers spent more time and energy speaking with their daughters about feelings and any burdens the parents themselves may carry. Rather than explain complicated emotions and demonstrate healthy communicative practices to both their daughters and their sons, the tiresome role of caretaker is bestowed upon girls at an early age and enforces decade-old gender stereotypes. “Parents also frequently introduce different activities to their sons and daughters, often encouraging girls to play with dolls, which can lead girls to believe they belong in caretaking, communal – in other words, kind – roles more than boys do” (Kramer 2020:2). Although Kramer’s recently conducted her research, her conclusions reflect years of previous research on the static act of motherhood on young children.

In her work on the motherhood mandate, Russo (1976) is clear in the purpose of socializing girls towards motherhood. “The personality of young girls has traditionally been shaped so that she is more likely to be dependent, passive, and conforming… making it more difficult for her to free herself from the demands of a pronatalist social context” (Russo 1976:145). Russo is in conversation with Gilligan (1982) in the latter’s discussion of gendered voices and judgements. Gilligan published this work in the late 20th century and stated that the purpose of positioning women in an inferior class to men has informed “the fiction of the

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⁵ For the sake of this research, I predominately speak in the binary form. I am by no means arguing that there are two genders. I recognize and appreciate the wide spectrum of gender and gender identities that exist. All existing literature surrounding motherhood and gender performance is largely written in the binary. I do not seek to exclude anyone in this research.
twentieth century and the corresponding recognition of the relativity of judgment infuse our scientific understanding as well when we begin to notice how accustomed we have become to seeing life through men’s eyes” (Gilligan 1982:6). The United States’ culture as we know it relies on the subordination of women. The placement of women as an inferior class of people is multi-layered. Like in all aspects of American society, White bodies are prioritized and held as the standard. Women of color, transwomen, gay women, and multi-abled women are held to said standards but can never achieve them, simply because they are not white. The same is true for mothers. “Latina and Black mothers are shouldering heavier burdens than white mothers. They are more likely to be their family’s sole breadwinner or have partners working outside the home during COVID-19” (McKinsey et. al. 2020:13). Thus, motherhood is always an intersectional experience, especially considering the economic and social inequalities highlighted by COVID. The resources provided to mothers have never adhered to the different realities of mothers across different races and socio-economic class positions. The prevailing culture within the United States teaches girls, no matter their stratified position, that their most important role to fulfill is motherhood, which has codified a complex system of motherhood standards that further debilitate women to and in this singular role. These expectations are approached differently amongst White mothers and mothers of color which I will explain this in greater depth in a later section.

Much like perceiving motherhood through micro- and macro- perspectives, it is also helpful to understand the role of a woman within her home through C. Wright Mills’ (1959) theory of the sociological imagination. Mills “make[s] clear the connection between personal troubles and broader social issues” (Mills 1959:3). Newman and Henderson (2014) use Mills’ literature as they explain the modern institution of hegemonic motherhood. “Motherhood is
experienced at the individual level, even while the expectations are defined at the cultural level” (Newman and Henderson 2014:472). The mother must meet her own set of obligations and expectations while gratifying the tedious requirements established by generations of misogynistic rules and practices.

**Intensive Mothering**

Hansen *et. al.* (2006) described intensive mothering as the “traditional view that a good mother is someone who ‘is there’ for their children and who prioritizes her child’s needs over her own” (Hansen *et. al.*2006:89). Throughout Hays’ research, she found that intensive mothering had become a standard largely practiced by the White, upper-middle classes. Mothers of color are held to the same expectations but can never fulfill that role because of systematic inequalities and stereotypes woven throughout United States’ culture (Hayes). Newman and Henderson state that the woman must be the primary caregiver because men cannot be relied upon for the duty. Raising children requires an exorbitant amount of time, which working fathers seems to have less of. In our country, Black and Brown families face great socio-economic injustices that make intensive practices impossible to execute. Families of color are more likely than white, upper-class families to rely on two or more incomes to keep themselves above the poverty line. “In 2020, the proportion of families with an unemployed person increased for White (9% of families), Black (13.4%), Asian (10.9%), and Hispanic (14.3%) families. White families were the least likely to have an unemployed member, and Hispanic families were the most likely” (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2021:3). When the mother has to work to keep her family afloat, intensive mothering is not possible, and she is deemed a “bad” mom. Not only is time a necessity expected of mothers, but a wealth of material resources is also in demand. “Women

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6 Dow (2019)
cannot be good women without being good mothers and they cannot be good mothers without accepting intensive mothering standards and staying at home to care for their children (Newman and Henderson 2014:474). This limited role creates a feeling of “perpetual inadequacy,” as mothers are made to feel guilty for not doing enough (by societal standards) and not spending enough time and material resources on their children. Fox (2009) mirrors these limitations in that U.S.’ culture is clear in how it regards successful mothers. Not only are these conditions stifling to a women’s identity, but intensive mothering creates a heavy burden on the parental dynamic. “Because women hold the responsibility for their babies, their efforts to unsettle gender-based divisions of work may nevertheless bolster the inequality of their relationships” (Fox 2009:159).

Even though the country has made strides in improvements\(^7\) for working women, “the United States has relied on intensive mothering norms to bridge the gaps between cultural change and its effect on childrearing” (Brown 1996:40). Brown (1996) adds that by confining women to the rigidity of intensive mothering, no matter her occupation, women are kept in a static position within their familial life, which in turn, produces mass amounts of guilt. Brown’s research like my own, focused on upper- and middle-class mothers who worked in organizational offices and firms, in occupations that require a college degree and more. Budds et. al. further explains this idea as the balancing act between working and mothering sets women up to fail as “women’s roles in the education and socialization of children became integral to the identity and behavior of ‘good’ mothers, shaping maternal practices and subjectivities” (Budds et al. 2017:338) which helps to keep women subordinate to their male counterparts. Damaske’s (2013) research provides some hope in defeating intensive standards by analyzing how parents,

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\(^7\) These “improvements” seem to be more ideology than fact. The United States still does not provide its citizens with universal health care and the country does not provide federally mandated paternal leave once a child is born. Women can work, but the difficulties surrounding childcare are not accounted for by the United States economy at large and in turn, become their burden.
predominately women, develop strategies to satisfy the never-ending demands of parenthood with working professionalism. These “gendered social practices… are malleable as women develop strategies to navigate current gender schemas, redefining their moral obligations in terms that better fit their circumstance” (Damaske 2013:41). It should not be the responsibility of the mother, alone, to maneuver the complicated expectations of intensive mothering while also practicing individual autonomy. The next sections of literature will delve deeper into the contradictions between the conflicting roles.

**Intensive Standards and Black Motherhood**

A great deal of literature surrounding intensive mothering looks predominantly at White, middle-class mothers who live in positions of privilege not only through their race but through their socio-economic status as well. The exclusion of Black mothers and other mothers of color from this mothering discourse stems from Western culture’s convoluted standards expected of women. “Although intensive mothering has largely been cast as a cultural phenomenon, the seeds of this ideology were planted during the 1980s and early 1990s when the conservative Reagan and Bush administration stripped a number of children and family support systems even while valorizing family and motherhood” (Elliott et. al. 2015:365). Elliott and her supporting researchers (2015) identified how the decaying of social programs directly impacted Black mothers who were reliant on government subsidies to provide for their families. Without the resources to care for her children, Black mothers were placed in an inferior position to that of White mothers. Reagan’s implicitly racist rhetoric echoed that of his republican predecessor, Nixon, who formulated the “war on drugs,” which has kept Black men trapped in the

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8 These strategies include boundaries, schedules/time-blocking, hiring outsourced care or relying on family members for assistance.
incarceration system for decades. In part because of the absence of Black men in U.S. society, “Black women are more likely than any other racial group to be raising children alone: 25% of Black women between the ages of 22 and 44 [are] single mothers… compared to 9% of White women” (Elliott et. al. 2015:353). This research is in communication with Hamilton’s (2020) findings as she explained how Black women and mothers have needed to create “self-definitions that counter these dominant images” (147) of Black Americans.

Hamilton’s research is heavily reliant on the monumental work of Patricia Hill Collins and her definition of controlling images, or the “stereotypical representations of Black womanhood that play a central role in the ideological justification of the intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Collins 2000:69). Hamilton, like Elliott, explained how Black motherhood has been understood as a social problem through the degradation of Black lives in the United States. Black mothers are held to the same standards of White mothers but live in a system that has been built off of centuries of oppression, making it harder for Black Americans to advance in economic status, thus making it near impossible for Black mothers to live up to the expensive and time-consuming demands of intensive mothering.

Most intensive practices are expected of the American middle-class. In her book on mothering while Black, Dow (2019) explained how “middle-class Americans are often envisioned as having access to a range of privileges and amenities, such as neighborhoods with low crime rates, increased personal safety, high quality recreational resources, access to better and schools, and greater occupational and residential opportunities” (Dow 2019:7). This picturesque way of life has historically benefitted White families while Black Americans and other families of color are excluded. This has created what Dow referred to as “white motherhood society,” in which the resources available to her in the “realm of homemaking and
“caregiving” determine whether or not she is a “good” mother. Black mothers have been systematically excluded from these resources, however, forcing Black mothers to “navigate a social and cultural context that has shifted to include increasing class divisions within African American communities, new neighborhood and educational constraints and opportunities, and post racial perspectives on identity that have not been considered in previous research” (Dow 2019:9). As intensive practices are expected of all middle-class women but with unequal resource distribution, Black mothers face greater challenges when cultivating lives for their families.

*Working Motherhood vs. Intensive Mothering*

It is surely a privilege to have the financial incentives that allow a woman to choose how she spend her days. The decision to work or stay home should be reached through equal conversations between partners after weighing the benefits of working and staying at home. The ability to work outside the home implies a great deal of privilege, either in having a partner who can complete an equal amount of care, or financial incentives to ensure that the children and home are taken care of in the absence of parents. The ability to work outside of the home can foster creativity, independence, and autonomy which may not be accessible to women who stay home. While staying home is a completely viable and valid decision, working provides women with independence and some separation from their home life, if that is what they prefer. Ignoring the family for a moment, women do have a greater variety of choice in occupations. They are no longer limited to the secretary-type and have ventured into fields that have long been dominated by men. There is certainly less pressure for younger women to bear children, allowing her to start a career before reproducing. Bringing the family back into the equation, women are encouraged to strive professionally but are limited by her domestic responsibilities that are not equally parsed
with her male counterparts. When women are able to work, they become more autonomous beings. There is less of a threat to stay in unhappy partnerships for financial security if women can build and sustain lives for themselves, with or without children (Russo 1976). Plus, the participation of women in the workforce infinitely helps a nation’s economy. However, the benefits of being a working mother do not come without cost. Russo explains the dual role in wanting to be a “good” mother vs. a working mother; she cannot be both. “Because motherhood has traditionally mandated that women stay at home with their children in order to be good parents, women have experienced role conflict as they attempt to balance the relative rewards and costs of children and work” (Russo 1976:147).\footnote{This was the largely accepted perspective of the latter half of the 20th century, when Russo completed this work. Although these perceptions still exist in some capacity, expectations of women and mothers are changing. There is a prevailing belief that woman can do it all: work, mother, and give time to herself- it just requires a great deal of coordination and in many cases, greater financial incentives.}

This role-conflict, although stifling to women across the country, is especially harmful to working-class women and mothers of color as they are more likely than white mothers to need a second income. This places them in special bind as they are unable to conform to intensive standards because of their economic positioning.

Women who outside of their homes are expected to choose between fulfilling their occupational ambitions and excelling in motherhood. Again, the ability to make such a choice does not extend to all mothers, especially those in poorer economic stratifications. Hochschild (2012) explained the difficulties working women face in their “arrangement between career and family, the family was the welfare agency for the [male dominated work force] and women were its social workers. Now women are working in such institutions without benefit of the social worker” (Hochschild 2012:24). Damaske’s (2013) research is similar to Russo’s and Hochschild’s in stating that women are placed in a double-bind, or a “no-win” situation when it comes to occupying both roles. She says, “women who work are accused of neglecting their
children, women who have no children are depicted as cold, mothers who work face wage penalties and fewer opportunities for promotion, and women who do not work are called unproductive or worse” (Damaske 2013:436). Russo and Damaske completed their research decades apart, indicating that little has changed in how we regard working womanhood and motherhood. Even in more progressive households, there can still be a disproportionate amount of parenting responsibilities expected of the mother.

More and more families in the United States strive to embrace gender equality. However, this seems to be easier said than done. Arpino and Luppi (2020) conducted their research in the first spring of the pandemic and found that more women than men complete a “double shift” after a full day of paid work. The term “double shift” was originally defined by Hochschild in explaining the unequal division of parental and domestic labor after a day of paid work. “The long hours men devote to work and to recovering from work are often taken from untold stories, unthrown balls, and uncuddled children left behind at home” (Hochschild 2012:25). This second shift of laborious work has been socialized as women’s work, limiting her capabilities of advancing within her occupation. This extra shift implies the level of strain many working mothers feel from “incompatibilities between roles assumed in the labor market and family” (Arpino and Luppi 2020:550). This qualitative statement is verified by the Pew Research Center’s (2015) quantitative look into working parents and how the responsibilities are parsed between the mother and father. “Even in households where both parents work full time, many say a large share of day-to-day parenting responsibilities falls to mothers… More than half (56%) of all working mothers say this balancing act is difficult. Among working mothers, in particular, 41% report that being a parent has made it harder for them to advance in their career; about half that of working fathers (20%) say the same” (Pew Research Center 2015:1). Working
a double-shift and feeling as though the role of motherhood is too much of a burden on her job and her family often causes women to leave the workforce, either on a part-time basis or entirely. This outcome only perpetuates the notion that a woman’s purpose it to take care of a home and all that inhabit it. There is often a greater financial incentive for women to leave their occupations, rather than their male counterparts, because men tend to occupy positions that are compensated at greater levels than women. These “persistent ideologies of gender and motherhood, persistent gender inequalities in the labor market, social policies, and time pressures of couples all promote conventional arrangements with parenthood” (Fox 2009:153). The decisions that women are forced to make for the benefit of their families disenfranchises future generations of working women by perpetuating the assumption that women are the sole recipients of childcare responsibilities.

This table was constructed by the United States Census Bureau in 2021 and found that “overall, mothers across all race and ethnic groups faced challenges in the labor market but non-white single mothers were hit the hardest” (Heggeness et. al. 2021:23).
Compared to other Western nations, the United States provides few incentives to keep women in the workforce, especially in the months following a child’s birth. Besides having socialized medicine and a much more forgiving healthcare system, Western-European countries like Germany provide mothers AND fathers months of paid leave following a child’s birth. Kluve and Tamm (2013) explained that there is no pressure for either parent to swiftly return to work and that the responsibilities can be shared equally. Ignoring banal responsibilities for a moment, the United States’ system of maternal leave (and lack of paternal leave) creates unequal parental expectations within the home as new mothers leave work for extended periods of time, more so than new fathers. “For women earning more than $75,000 each year, the median number of weeks taken for maternity leave in the U.S. was twelve. Women earning less than $30,000 took a median of six weeks for maternity leave. Not taking account income, the median number of weeks a father took for paternity leave was one” (Rider University 2020:11). Maternity leave is dependent on a woman’s annual income, so, it is implied that upper- and middle-class women benefit from maternity care practices at a disproportionate rate to poor women and families. Without sufficient insurance provided by employers and the United States government, many American families rely on outsourced childcare which is “key in women’s ability to juggle motherhood and work outside the home” (Arpino and Luppi 2020:552). The ability to ease such an obligation is crucial in allowing mothers to succeed. Still, the ability to outsource child and homecare is a stratified phenomenon that benefits from a great deal of socio-economic privilege.

**Understanding the Ability to Outsource Childcare**

“Outsourced childcare” is an umbrella term that I refer to throughout this paper as all care that is not provided by a child’s parents. This can include paid babysitters and nannies, extended family members, schools and daycare centers. There is no doubt that outsourced childcare is
beneficial to working parents. This feminized position\(^\text{10}\) relieves the stresses of familial responsibilities so that women can work outside of their homes. “Previous research has shown flexibility, affordability, and availability of external childcare are important prerequisites for women’s participation in the labor market” (Arpino and Luppi 2020:569). Although Arpino and Luppi outline the benefits of professional childcare, they are explicit in describing how outsourced childcare is distributed in the United States. Those who able to afford babysitters and nannies are, more often than not, White, upper-middle class families. “In a model of childcare as standard economic commodity – with a relationship between quality of care, costs, and parental decisions about childcare – one would assume that parents would want their child to have good quality care and are prepared to pay for it” (Hansel et al. 2006:95). Hansen et. al.’s findings are similar to the formers’ as they described how the inability to afford childcare “traps” women in their homes. Their findings confirm that this financial burden disproportionately effects families of color and single mothers. Hansen et. al. concluded that when children, especially girls, have a working mother, they are more likely to obtain higher levels of education than children who do not. The financial ability to hire outsourced childcare has lasting effects, not only on working women, but on younger generations as well.

The Coronavirus: A Brief Synopsis

On December 31\(^\text{st}\) of 2019, health authorities in Wuhan, China identified a highly infectious virus that had already affected multiple people across Asia. Only eleven days into the new year, the first death caused by this unknown virus was reported in Wuhan (Taylor 2021) and near the end of January, the United States and several countries alike reported a number of cases

\(^{10}\) There is a great deal of sociological research on the stratification of childcare positions, including immigration and abusive tendencies. For the sake of this research, I do not speak at large of the inequalities childcare workers face, but I encourage readers to do so!
after citizens arrived from transnational travel from China. Taylor (2021), a journalist for the New York Times and the AJMC provide a timeline for the progression of the virus and its domination over American life:

On January 30th, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a “global health emergency of international concern” and only one day after, “the Trump administration suspended entry into the United States by any foreign nationals who traveled to China in the past fourteen days, excluding the immediate family members of American citizens or permanent residents. By this date, 213 people had died and nearly 9,800 had been effected worldwide” (Taylor 2021:2). Despite the travel ban from China and other Asian countries, the United States remained “normal,” until the spring of 2020. On March 19th, “California [became] the first state to issue a stay-at-home order, mandating all residents to stay at home except to an essential job or shop for essential needs. The order also instruct[ed] health care systems to prioritize services to those who [were] the sickest” (AJMC 2021:1).

Following California’s closures, much of the United States began restricted access to non-essential businesses including a limited amount of people in grocery stores or amount of hospital visitors. Educational institutions across the country, whether it be lower-schools or college universities, kept their students home following their spring breaks and resumed school on a remote-basis. Throughout the spring of 2020, coronavirus cases across the United States worsened even though citizens were strongly encouraged to stay in their homes. On May 28th, it was announced that the United States surpassed 100,000 deaths in a span of three short months. The Center for Disease Control, the organization responsible for suggested restrictions, stated that the alarmingly high death toll was “a sobering development and a heart-breaking reminder of the horrible toll of this unprecedented pandemic” and called for Americans to “continue
following local and state guidance on prevention strategies, such as social distancing, good hand hygiene, and wearing a face mask while in public” (AJMC 2021:1). After a year of the virus continuing to spread across the country, the United States announced the authorization of “Pfizer’s COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use on December 11th, clearing the way for millions of highly vulnerable people to begin receiving the vaccine within days. The authorization was a historic turning point in a pandemic that had taken more than 290,000 lives in the United States” (Taylor 2021:24). By the spring of 2021, multiple medical organizations released their own version of the vaccine, helping expand the availability of the lifesaving shot.

In 2021 (more than a year since the beginning of the pandemic), life for Americans has yet to return to normal. The Pew Research Center released two studies on the impact of the pandemic on American life and how said changes with likely to have withstanding consequences. Due to social distancing measures, acts that what would have seemed mundane and dependable prior to the pandemic can now carry serious implications. In one of their studies, the Pew Research Center (2020) found that “about nine-in-ten U.S. adults (91%) say that, given the current situation, they would feel uncomfortable attending a crowded party. Roughly three-quarters (77%) would not want to eat out in a restaurant” (Pew Research Center 2020:1). These sentiments have begun to change as vaccines become more available but there will likely be lingering fears of close contact with unfamiliar faces. Not only have simple acts like going out to eat become part of the past, but there have also been significant changes to how non-domestic work is conducted in and out of the home. About 40% of working-age adults stated that they have worked from home since the beginning of the pandemic, which has caused an up-tick in “stress and depression, weight gain or a lack of exercise. Women were especially likely to mention physical or mental health difficulties: one in three women did so (33%) compared to
one-in-five men (21%)” (Pew Research Center: 2021). The pandemic perpetuated adversities that
are affecting the workplace across the United States are largely experienced by women,
especially working mothers.

COVID-19’s Effects on Mothers

Before COVID, “working mothers were already shouldering the majority of family
caregiving responsibilities in the face of a childcare system that is wholly inadequate for a
society in which most parents work outside the home” (Bateman and Ross 2020:2). Throughout
their research, Bateman and Ross focus on how the pandemic has interfered with parents’
abilities to outsource childcare. Due to restrictions put into place by the Center for Disease
Control at the beginning of the virus, contact with those outside the nuclear family was strongly
suggested to be on a limited basis. Bateman and Ross set the groundwork for Cohen’s and Hsu’s
(2020) research as they examine how COVID has and will continue to scar a generation of
working women. The changes to our daily lives have been so extreme, including limited contact
with those outside the immediate family, forcing women to leave their occupation to resume the
role of full-time caretaker. The United Nations released a policy briefing in the summer of 2020
with similar conclusions to those stated above. The UN found that “as formal and informal
supply of childcare declines, the demand for unpaid childcare provisions is falling more heavily
on women, not only because of the existing structure of the workforce, but also because of social
norms” (United Nations 2020:13). Having to leave the workforce because of childcare
constraints caused by COVID is just one of the many inequalities perpetuated by the pandemic
that will have lasting effects on women across the world.

COVID is exposing the pre-existing adversities women face in the U.S. “Before COVID-
19 became a universal pandemic, women were doing three times as much unpaid care and
domestic work as men” (United Nations 2020:13). In a study focused on chores performed by women and men during the pandemic, Topping and Duncan (2020) found that “women were doing 44% more housework in March and April, down from 2014-15, but by September, women were spending 64% more time on household responsibilities than men” (Topping and Duncan 2020:2). Considering that women have been dealt the majority of domestic duties, they are given less time to work and have little time to spend on themselves. The Catalyst research group released their findings on the impact of COVID-19 on working parents and found that “a majority of mothers say they are primarily responsible for managing childcare tasks throughout the workweek, such as preparing meals, supervising homework, and even monitoring playtime with their child(ren). Mothers feel more guilt in attempting to meet work-life demands and experience more feelings of anxiety” (Catalyst 2020:3) than fathers. Catalyst, along with Topping and Duncan, provide crucial insights to the complex exchange between working and parenting amidst a pandemic. This relationship strain causes more conflicts for mothers than fathers, as women are held to higher and more demanding expectations in all aspects of lives, including in the home and workplace.

The complexities working (and stay-at-home) mothers are facing during the pandemic are causing women to make drastic decisions that many would never consider making, had COVID-19 never existed. McKinsey et. al. (2020) dedicated their study to women in the workplace amidst the pandemic. They found that “one in four women are contemplating what many would have considered unthinkable less than a year ago: downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce” (McKinsey et. al. 2020:6) entirely. The researchers in this study also provide a crucial aspect of working-motherhood during the pandemic: mom burn out. So much is expected of women, especially mothers, that many feel they are unable to complete anything at work or
are too distracted to give anything their full attention at home. Much like intensive mothering standards, parenting demands during COVID have made women feel inadequate, “I feel like I’m failing at everything…” (McKinsey et. al. 2020:17). Not to say that working fathers do not feel these pressures, but women report, throughout many of the studies cited in this research, higher levels of stress due to working and parenting. Women feel the need to leave the professional sphere at disproportionate rates to men “because men tend to out earn women” (Grose 2020: 3). McKinsey et. al. further explained the sociological imagination as it pertains to motherhood: no two women have identical experiences. The McKinsey research team, much like myself, focused on the shift in everyday lives of both working and stay-at-home mothers thus far in the pandemic. Throughout this research, it was concluded that whether our world is experiencing a viral pandemic or not, mothers are held to the impossible expectations we, as a social chasm, (re)construct.

Men are more likely than women to make more money in any professional setting, whether it be as a teacher, a doctor, or a finance executive. “Before COVID-19, nearly half of all working women – 46% or twenty-eight million – worked in jobs paying lower wages, with median earnings of only $10.93 per hour” (Bateman and Ross 2021:3). Wage disparities like this make social mobility and occupational flexibility harder for women. This pay gap is nothing new but will only worsen because of the coronavirus. “The high exposure of women to employment loss is therefore likely to put upward pressure on the average gender wage gap for years to come” (Alon et. al.2020: 3). Alon et. al. complements previously cited researchers as they confidently state that COVID-19 is pushing women back into their homes, which will incite “heterosexual couples to fall back into traditional gender roles” (Grose 2020:2). It is my hope, that throughout my own research, I will gain a clear understanding for how COVID is
reinforcing long-established gender expectations and how women are dynamic in their flow of work and motherhood. This research builds off of the concepts outlined throughout this literature review and how such theories and standards are prevalent in the coronavirus pandemic. Each interview takes a closer look at the individual struggles mothers are facing and how any and all gender disparities are heightened in the era of COVID-19.

Methodology

I conducted research for this project through semi-structured qualitative interviews. Initially, I posted on two different Facebook pages to recruit mothers in my area but after a few days of no responses, I asked Sasha and another mother, Danielle, whom I have worked for in the past, to spread my abstract and contact information around. Although I did not interview Sasha and Danielle\(^\text{11}\), they acted as my seeds, helping me get in touch with enough participants. With their help, I was able to interview eight mothers, ages ranging from mid-30s to early 40s. Each mother had at least two children, at most, four. Their children ranged in ages from ten-months to thirteen years old; one mother was pregnant with her third. In my research prior to conducting these interviews, I found a plethora of data describing the disparities single mothers and mothers of color face in the workforce and in their abilities to outsource childcare in the pandemic. I hoped to examine these findings in my own data, however, because of the demographics of my area, the majority of my participants are White and Jewish, living in high-income neighborhoods with their partner of many years. I was able to speak with one Asian and one South Asian mother living in the same high-income areas as the mothers mentioned above.

\(^{11}\) I wanted to keep an appropriate amount of distance between the participants and myself.
When organizing my preliminary research, I concluded that qualitative interviews would best serve my research’s purpose. I wanted to best understand how mothers are feeling during COVID-19 and how the changes within U.S. society have impacted them directly.

“Qualitative methods help provide rich descriptions of phenomena. They enhance understanding of the context of events as well as the event themselves” (Sofaer 1999:1102). Unlike quantitative methods of data collection, qualitative research focuses less on numbers and statistics and more on the “complex, dynamic, and multi-dimensional wholes” (Sofaer 1999:1102). Interviews and more personal methods alike are helpful for the researcher to gauge a clearer understanding of historical events, like COVID, and how such happenings effect individuals based on their specific circumstances. When answering the “so what?” question, qualitative methods “helps us to understand the nature, strengths, and interactions of variables” (Black 1994:425).

I believe that qualitative interviews provided me with a unique insight into the challenges of motherhood throughout the pandemic. There are some other research methods, like participant observation, which would have been a useful means of conducting research, but because of CDC guidelines, I did not want to sit in participants’ homes for prolonged periods of time.

Interviewing, like any other method of research, certainly comes with limitations. I gathered my participants from two mothers in similar economic positions, who gave me a list of their friends to contact, also in their socio-economic stratification. Because of my participants’ similarities, much of the research I collected was the homogeneous. There were little differences amongst my participants in how they lived throughout COVID and how they implemented their financial resources to supplement childcare in the pandemic. Despite these limitations, I knew that interviewing would provide the most insightful research as COVID is an extremely “complex
situation where the relevant variables associated with [its] outcome” (Black 1994:426) are not universal.

Each interview lasted no more than thirty-minutes; some were as short as fifteen minutes. Although I found the shorter interviews to be frustrating, the length of time a mother could talk to me was an important research finding in and of itself. Many of the mothers spoke with me during their lunch/afternoon break, in between work calls and feeding their children. Some women spoke to me with very little energy, after a long day of work and putting her children to bed. One mother spoke to me in her car on her way to the grocery store because it was the only time she had to herself. Another mother sat on the bathroom floor with her laptop perched on a closed toilet so her children would not interrupt her. A majority of the interviews had to be paused temporarily by children and husbands asking for help or for the mother to log a child on to their next class or supply a water bottle before bedtime. Each interview was similarly constructed, asking questions pertaining to daily routine before and during COVID; shifts in professional work lives; if the pandemic has changed her identity as a woman and mother; tasks that boost productivity throughout the day; moments for self-care; distribution of parental care at home; abilities to outsource and how working at home feels. Questions varied from mother-to-mother depending on her situation and the amount of time she had to speak.

Limitations and Reflexivity

As I stated before, I was not able to curate a sample as diverse as I had hoped for. Much of the information provided by the mothers is similar in their capabilities to provide for their families, especially when it comes to outsourcing. There is extremely valuable research on mothers of color and their lack of financial resources to afford non-familial childcare and are
thus forced to perpetuate traditional gender dynamics, more so than White women. I was not able to demonstrate that in my research because of my mostly homogeneous sample.

In any interview-based research, “people create “accounts” to explain behavior that may be subjected to valuate inquiry” (Damaske 2013:439). These “accounts” are specific explanations of decision-making behavior which the respondent provides, along with justifications for any given behavior should the subject fear criticism. “Accounts then, may provide women with the ability to gain the moral high ground in the “no-win” situation of contemporary motherhood” (Damaske 2013:439). By stating this, I do not wish to discredit any of the information provided by the mothers in my study. Rather, Damaske’s statement was helpful when I transcribed my information as I was better able to identify the rationale women had for staying home, instead of their husbands, or how they spoke about the inequalities they faced matter-of-factly. It is my hope that my research clearly identifies the injustices women are facing during COVID-19 and how these unjust setbacks will have long-lasting consequences on mothers and future generations of working women.

**Institutional Review Board and Confidentiality**

Before I started the research process, I submitted my proposal to the Dickinson College Institutional Review Board. The board eventually exempted my research from the review process as they concluded that no respondent would be endangered because of their participation. Despite being exempt from review, each mother signed a consent form before meeting with me. The consent form explicitly stated what was expected of them during the interview and that they could omit any information given to me during the writing process. All names, including those of children, schools, and towns, are portrayed under pseudonyms to further protect respondent’s confidentiality. Due to the pandemic, I did not meet with any participant in person. All
interviews were conducted over the phone and were recorded with a separate device, or through Zoom with its automatic recorder. All interviews were transcribed without software and annotated on a password protected document, on a password protected computer that only I have access to. The data collected through the transcribed interviews were categorized into the following sections: survival and exhaustion, navigating new expectations, establishing autonomy through the dependence on outsourcing, and negotiating with partners.

*Meet the Moms*

In order to provide the most comprehensive research possible to answer the question of how COVID has impacted working and stay-at-home mothers, curating a racially diverse sample was more of a struggle than I anticipated. I also strived for an even balance of working and stay-at-home mothers; beggars can’t be choosers. I spoke with a total of eight mothers, two devoted their day-to-day routine to their home life and children while the remaining six worked in professional realms outside of their home. The first mother I spoke with, who is quoted often throughout my research because of her prevalent intensive mothering standards, is a white mother of four young children who are all under the age of seven. Alexis has a PhD in developmental psychology and was working as a developmental psychologist when she decided to stop working in 2015, after her twins were born. I explain her situation in greater depth as my research unfolds, but Alexis’ husband makes a “ridiculous amount of money,” so much so that there was no conversation about her leaving work when she did- it was simply implied. Naomi, a South Asian mother to three young children under the age of ten, is in a similar situation to Alexis. Naomi has a master’s degree in education and worked as a teacher until her middle child was born in 2015. Like Alexis, her husband makes a “ridiculous amount of money” as a financial analyst at a New York City hedge fund, so there was little conversing about Naomi leaving work.
Naomi displayed some intensive care practices but not nearly as much as Alexis. Although the two women are highly educated in specialized fields, they no longer contribute to their disciplines since they decided to stop working to care for their families full-time.

**Figure 1: Meet the Moms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Alexis</th>
<th>Naomi</th>
<th>Rose</th>
<th>Annie</th>
<th>Liza</th>
<th>Rachel</th>
<th>Cassidy</th>
<th>Whitney</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Children</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 (and pregnant)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s Name</td>
<td>Never named</td>
<td>Never named</td>
<td>David</td>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Brady</td>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>Never named</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree Earned</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>AuD (post-graduate)</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Stay-at-home</td>
<td>Stay-at-home</td>
<td>Audiologist</td>
<td>Director within non-profit</td>
<td>Director within non-profit</td>
<td>Director within non-profit</td>
<td>Sales</td>
<td>Consulting firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-schooling</td>
<td>On-line</td>
<td>On-line</td>
<td>On-line</td>
<td>In-person</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>On-line</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>On-line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsourced Care</td>
<td>Housekeeping</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Babysitter and housekeeping</td>
<td>Babysitter and housekeeping</td>
<td>Babysitter and housekeeping</td>
<td>Housekeeping</td>
<td>Housekeeping</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: interviews with participants 2021

Some of the working mothers displayed implicit intensive standards but not nearly to the degree that Alexis and Naomi spoke of. There was some semblance of guilt and confusion between working at home during the pandemic and caring for their children, but every working mother was able to differentiate their conflicting and new-found responsibilities in a fashion that benefitted their unique situation. Among the six mothers, there are some differences in shared responsibilities between them and their husbands, as well as the amount of childcare or housekeeping services they outsourced. Rose, a white mother of two, was laid off in the beginning of the pandemic and quickly began her own audiology practice. Her husband, David, has become more involved in their children’s lives and has been helping them with on-line school while also working from home full-time. Despite the uniqueness of working outside the home while her husband tends to their children, Rose exhibited some internalized intensive
ideals which became clear in her language which I outline in a later section. Similar to Rose, Whitney, an Asian mother of three, is proud of her egalitarian relationship with her husband who also presented some internalized intensive ideals throughout our interview. Both Rose and Whitney have high status jobs and negotiate their time spent on work and with their families with their male partners.12

The remaining four mothers exhibited smaller amounts of guilt and stress when describing the balancing act of motherhood and professionalism. Each woman said they had egalitarian relationship with their husband, although two spoke of an undeniable imbalance of parental responsibilities. Cassidy, a white mother of three including ten-month old baby, works in sales and is able to do the majority of her work through email applications on her phone. She described her husband, Jackson, as extraordinarily hands-on and involved father to their kids but noticed and spoke of how the majority of childcare responsibilities became her obligation. Although Cassidy did not display any internalized intensive standards, she noticed how such measures are perpetuated in her children’s institutions. When describing her experience of online school for her children, for example, she was relentless in describing how the teachers are always asking for the mother’s assistance, never the father’s. This sentiment was shared by Rachel, a white mother of two and director [of activities] for a large non-profit organization. Her husband, Brady, has been more involved with their kids’ schooling than she has. She was proud of this. Brady, a therapist, has more control over his schedule and is able to work around his children’s needs. Rachel did express some internalized pressure to do more chores around the

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12 All of the working mothers had few people who worked above them as superiors. The mothers did not have to negotiate schedules with bosses and could rely on their teams and assistants to cover anything they could not complete.
house while working from home but is able to organize her day between work and familial responsibilities.

Annie, a white mother of two, and Liza, a white mother of two and pregnant, work as directors at the same successful non-profit as Rachel. The two women are similar to one another in that they have very involved husbands and take time to sit with their partners to map out their weekly schedule to make sure that everything and everyone is accounted for. Annie was happy to work from home so that her daughters could see the importance of her work. Liza also appreciated her kids being able to understand what she does but did express some guilt around not spending more time with her children. These feelings were new for Liza, as she explained that when she worked in an office prior to COVID, she never felt like she missed her children; she was able to focus on work. Among these six working mothers, Whitney, Cassidy, and Rose do not employ any outsourced childcare while Annie, Liza, and Rachel have regular assistance. With the exception of Naomi, every working and non-professional mother in this study outsourced cleaning services. These differences and the sociological reasoning behind them are explained elsewhere in this thesis.

Every mother who participated in my research has master’s degrees or higher. Annie, Liza, Rachel, and Rose worked the same amount if not more than their husbands and these women, including Whitney were all directors or vice presidents of practices, consultation firms, and non-profits. Liza described her position, “it’s called the impact department- I’m our chief impact officer, I oversee… impact assessment, which is like the value, you know, data and evaluation. I oversee marketing communications.” What I found most interesting was that Alexis, a holder of a PhD, was one of the few women who did not work. She said:

*I have a PhD in clinical developmental psychology, um, and I kind of, you know, worked... finished by PhD and started by post-doc and everything while starting my*
Alexis felt overwhelmed from working and being an unusually involved parent and because of her financial incentives provided by her husband, felt that it was in the best interest of her family and herself to stop working. Here, she describes how the anxiety she felt while working before giving birth to her twins is similar to how she feels during COVID. Having to come “up for air” was a reoccurring theme among many of the mothers in this study and is further examined in the next section.

**Data Analysis**

*Survival and Exhaustion: The New Normal for Mothers in COVID-19*

Each mother, no matter their professional status, reported feeling overwhelmed, more so than before the pandemic. The mothers within this study are all members of higher socio-economic classes but were not strangers to the emotional difficulties produced by COVID. There was a spectrum of home-schooling situations, some children were remote full-time while others participated in a hybrid form. Annie was the only mother with children who went to full-time, in-person school. There is a heightened need for unpaid childcare because of closed school districts (Cohen and Hsu 2020), which has placed an astounding burden on working parents, especially mothers. Not only were participants worried about themselves and whether they could perform well in their occupations amidst a global pandemic, they expressed new anxieties about the well-being and educational longevity of their children. Alexis explained how in the beginning of the global shutdown, she felt helpless. This feeling of distress was similar to how she felt

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13 None of the children’s zoom/in-person schooling was decided by the mothers. The women followed what their school districts provided.
while attempting to work while pregnant and was disappointed in the little guidance she received from her school district. She explained,

_What’s been so disappointing for me has been the school, the school district... that we live in... it’s been very disappointing because, as someone with a PhD who understands data, a little more... I mean like I understood right away that schools were safe... there was no benefit to keeping schools closed._

Alexis was strong in her opinion that schools should be open. Regardless of whether or not this is a good idea, Alexis felt that had the school offered more assistance and information to parents, her feelings of anguish would have dissipated. Cassidy shared a similar sentiment of frustration and panic around her school districts lack of support. She explained how in the beginning stages of lockdown, teachers and other faculty gave little notice about what was to come regarding her children’s education. She said,

_In the beginning infancy stages of COVID, when we kind of had no idea about what was going on, it was more or less a survival day-to-day because there was really no direction coming from above, like with the school districts and the teachers, everyone was kind of like, “we don’t know what’s happening” ... so there was more or less, no routine._

Cassidy continued to explain the adjustment to life and mothering in COVID as “survival.” She added that mothers in her friend-circle expressed similar accounts of feeling “kind of isolated and just surviving.” Cassidy, whose husband works from home, became the sole facilitator of her children’s education, making sure that they were logged on to Zoom on time and were up-to-speed on their lesson objectives. “Of course, the disruption to… schools and afterschool programs have been hard on working fathers, but evidence shows working mothers have taken on more of the resulting childcare responsibilities and are more frequently reducing their hours or leaving their jobs entirely” (Bateman and Ross 2020:2). Cassidy exemplifies the inordinate amount of responsibility mothers have been dealt during the pandemic as she struggled to establish boundaries between her needs and those of her children in the beginning of the
pandemic. Naomi, although she did not work herself, expressed concern for the latter half of Bateman’s and Ross’ statement when she explained the situations she has observed through her friends:

* I have girlfriends who are not just teachers who are... executives and doctors... like all across the, you know, clinical coordinator or pharmacist, like running the pharmacies and hospitals and all of them have... essentially... [lost] their minds or quit. *

Naomi acknowledged the struggles working mothers have had to face throughout the past year and expressed some gratitude for not having to be in the position of choosing between her career or her children.  

Feelings of survival and isolation were common themes found in many of the mothers’ accounts. It seems that the school districts did little to aid parents, especially working mothers, in the beginning phases of COVID and the mothers had to mend new uncertainties on their own.  

It is, of course, important to acknowledge that no two women have experienced the pandemic in exactly the same fashion (McKinsey *et. al.* 2020). However, each woman expressed feeling as though living day-to-day was like having to survive, indicating that there is a great institutional inequity in how mothers are regarded and provided for, and within this inequity is a greater need for intersectional advocacy.

With survival came exhaustion. When a mother mentioned the word “survival,” it was usually accompanied by some explanation of fatigue and burnout. Rachel explains this pattern well in describing the newly defined role of being a working mother,

*It’s exhausting to be a working parent because you’re teaching, you’re, like, you’re nurturing. You’re disciplining. Like there’s all these things that you’re trying to do and...* 

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14 Although Naomi was happy that she didn’t have to choose between her professional needs and her children’s education in 2020, she made the decision to do the same in 2015, after her second child was born. She is not so different from her friends now.

15 These mothers and their families live in some of the wealthiest cities in the United States with nationally top-ranked public schools. The women never explained why their schools were slow in relaying crucial information in the beginning of COVID, but it can be assumed like many individuals, schools struggled to find their footing amidst the chaos. Despite being a well-funded public system, schools like the ones used by the mothers in this study, and their budgets are “now significantly depleted” (Griffith and Berry 2020:5). Many of the mothers also assumed the role of teacher and tutor.
do you own job at the same time. So, like, to wear all those different hats, it’s so conflicting and it’s so confusing at times.

Before COVID, Rachel and the other working mothers had very similar routines. They would wake up (usually before the sun rose), work out, shower, make breakfast for their children (while their husbands woke up), make sure everyone was dressed and out the door in time for school. Rachel, Annie, and Liza split school drop-off and pick-up responsibilities with their husbands, while Cassidy and Whitney either did it themselves or relied on family members for assistance. Each mother fondly reminisced on the separation between work and family. Annie joked of how she longed for the days where her important meeting would not take place in her bedroom; Rachel said that she missed the feeling of the leaving work and arriving home to relax. Once work ended, the mothers would take their children to numerous activities, cook dinner, and make sure homework was done. Rachel’s, Liza’s, Annie’s and Cassidy’s husbands were always involved with homework and dinner and depending on his schedule, Whitney’s husband would cook for the family. None of this was true for Alexis and Naomi as their husbands worked longer hours and were far less involved in the daily routines of their families.

Figure 2: Changes in Practices and Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alexis (stay at home)</th>
<th>Before COVID</th>
<th>During COVID</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Alexis (stay at home)** | • Wake up at 6:45 (husband left for work around 5:30)  
• Three different drop-off sites for three different schools  
• Make breakfast and pack four lunch boxes  
• Two youngest children were picked up from school at 11:30 and fed lunch at home | • Wake up at 6:45 (did not mention what time husband wakes up)  
• Make breakfast for four children  
• Coordinates different zoom logins; sits with younger children while they are in class  
• Three different lunch times  
• No after school activities  
• Alexis makes dinner |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Naomi (stay at home)</th>
<th>Rose (working)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two oldest children were picked up around 3</td>
<td>In her short interview, Rose did not elicit great detail about her schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After school activity drop-offs, different activities for different days of the week</td>
<td>Wake up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband arrives home at 6:30</td>
<td>Leave for her office around 8:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexis makes dinner</td>
<td>Husband handles online school with their children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housekeeper cleans up</td>
<td>No after school activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedtime routines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi did not specify wake up time, but she woke early, after her husband left for work</td>
<td>Wake up later, husband wakes up at the same time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make breakfast for three children</td>
<td>Oldest daughter goes to her at-home classroom in their homes for school, the middle child goes in the basement for class and is supervised by Naomi as she tends to her baby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take one to the bus stop and drive the younger two to school</td>
<td>No after school activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pick youngest child up from school midday and take her to after school activities (swim, gymnastic, etc.)</td>
<td>Naomi started mandatory reading and puzzle time to keep her children’s brains working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pick oldest up from school in the afternoon while youngest was with babysitter and take them to after school activities</td>
<td>Naomi makes dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi makes dinner</td>
<td>Bedtime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedtime</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Babysitter would pick them up from school and drive them to afterschool activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wake up and 5:15 and workout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shower and dressed by 7:00; Justin would wake at 6:30 and commute into Manhattan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wake children up, feed them breakfast and out the door by 7:45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drop youngest off, then the oldest in another building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work in office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Babysitter would pick children up from school and take them to after school activities (soccer, dance, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annie would arrive home at 3:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make dinner for her children; they did not eat as a family prior to COVID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Justin arrived home arrived home around 6:30 and the two would eat together while kids got themselves ready for bed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family eats together</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|        | Wake up at 5:45 and workout; doesn’t feel pressure to be “fully locked and loaded” |                    |                     |
|        | Shower and dressed by 7:00; Justin wakes up at 7:00                               |                    |                     |
|        | One parent takes on child, wakes them up, and drops them off at school            |                    |                     |
|        | Start work at 8:15                                                                |                    |                     |
|        | Babysitter brings youngest home from school, oldest is picked up from bus station |                    |                     |
|        | Babysitter takes children to after school activities (there are fewer now)        |                    |                     |
|        | Family eats together                                                               |                    |                     |

|        | Wake up earlier than husband to workout                                           |                    |                     |
|        |                                                                                   |                    |                     |
|        | Wake up earlier than husband to workout                                           |                    |                     |
| Liza   |                                                                                   |                    |                     |
|        |                                                                                   |                    |                     |
| Rachel (working) | Liza and Michael would get their children ready for school together and divide school drop-offs  
| Work in office from 8:00-5:00  
| Babysitter picked children up from school and took them to afterschool activities  
| Liza arrived home around 5:30 and would “hangout” with her children  
| 5:30 – 7:00 screenless time; make dinner for family  
| Bedtime | Liza and Michael still get their children ready for their day together  
| Oldest daughter goes to school in one room, while younger son goes to school in another  
| Babysitter is home to supervise while Liza worked in her home office  
| 5:30 – 7:00 screenless time  
| Make dinner  
| Bedtime |

| • Wake up at 6:15 and workout; Brady would wake up around 7:00  
| • Woke kids up with Brady wound 7:30  
| • Either parent dropped both children off at school by 8:20  
| • Babysitter picked children off from aftercare and would take them to afterschool activities (tennis, dance, etc.)  
| • Rachel would arrive home by 5:30; Brady would arrive home by 6:30  
| • Rachel cooked and Brady supervised homework  
| • Split bedtime responsibilities | • Wake up at 6:45 and workout, Brady sleeps in later  
| • Children are logged on to class by 8:00; Brady supervises children throughout the day  
| • Babysitter comes midday and helps with school  
| • Babysitter takes children to afterschool activities  
| • Rachel stops work at 5:00  
| • Dinner at 5:15  
| • Rachel and Brady split bedtime and use 7:00 – 9:00 to catch up on work |
| Cassidy (working) | • Get up early (no time specified)  
|                  | • Two different drop-off times and two different school locations; drop off done by Cassidy  
|                  | • Middle child was picked up from school at 1:00, the oldest at 3:00  
|                  | • Cassidy took children to afterschool activities; she worked primarily through email and got much of her work done in the car  
|                  | • Supervise homework  
|                  | • Make dinner  
|                  | • Split bedtime responsibilities with Jackson  

| Whitney (working) | • Traveled for her job much of the time, was reliant on family members to supplement care  
|                  | • Did not specify timing  
|                  | • Children participated in numerous afterschool activities; dropped off my grandparents  
|                  | • Made dinner around 8:00  

|                  | • Less of a routine  
|                  | • Wake up time was not specified  
|                  | • Different login times all done by Cassidy  
|                  | • Makes lunch at different times  
|                  | • Drives children to fewer afterschool activities  
|                  | • Make dinner  
|                  | • Split bedtime responsibilities with Jackson  

|                  | • Did not specify times  
|                  | • Three different logins in three different rooms in her house  
|                  | • No afterschool activities and no help from grandparents  

Source: interviews with participants 2021

Without the help of in-person teachers and outside authority figures, Rachel felt the burden of having to make up for the new-found disparities (lack of socialization, etc.) in her children’s lives, while also working full-time in a high-status occupation. “Almost half of
employees say they have consistently felt stressed at work over the past few months, and about a third report feeling exhausted or burned out. For working parents – and working mothers in particular – those burdens are heavier” (McKinsey et. al. 2020:12). Rachel’s husband, Brady, has become much more involved with their children’s schedules because he had more control over his own schedule. She did not express any guilt over her situation, but still found that she had less time to complete work during the day due to other household/familial responsibilities.

Throughout the pandemic, Rachel and Brady established a routine where they put the kids to bed then sit together in their living room and complete any unfinished work for the day. Rachel said that this work time usually lasts long into the night, giving them less time to spend together and for sleep.

A lack of sleep and newfound responsibilities were not the only factors in producing feelings of exhaustion amongst the mothers. Liza found the “micro-decisions” of everyday life, especially ones that could affect her children, to be taxing. She explained how her eight-year-old daughter was invited to an outdoor birthday party of a classmate’s. At first, Liza gave it no second thought: her daughter would go to the party. Throughout our conversation, Liza expressed anxiety over her children’s lack of socialization and interaction with friends and saw the birthday party as an excellent opportunity for her daughter. However, she then thought about the potential dangers of being around other people in a closer proximity than anyone has experienced in months and how the decision to go to the party could have harmful consequences for the rest of Liza’s family. She said,

_The micro-decisions that you’re making every single day, trying to figure out how to be the best mom and what’s in the best interest of your kids. You know? That part for me has been exhausting... because it’s layered on top of fear... and at the same time, just wanting them to sort of have any normalcy._
Liza felt sorry for her daughter when she ultimately decided that going to the birthday party was not in her family’s best interest. She wants her children to have some standard of normalcy while also taking COVID-precautions seriously. Liza and many of the other mothers were worried about their decisions to remain strictly isolated which produced mental exhaustion as they questioned their own decisions while trying to be the best parents they could be. Rachel and Liza were often in conversation with one another throughout their separate transcripts. Rachel echoes Liza’s anxiety around making decisions that could benefit her children socially but harm her loved ones in future. Rachel said, “I actually think it’s a confusing time to be a working professional and at home, ‘cause it’s like, conflicting messages.” The mothers knew that there was no right way to keep their family safe and functioning, but they were never completely confident in their arrangements.

Such burdens have been placed on mothers since the beginning of the pandemic (and well before). Alexis, who was the most intensely involved mother I spoke with, explained further, “[mothers] are just drowning, and we’re all kind of alone, and I feel like nobody really cares. That’s definitely how I feel.” Whether it was lack of assistance from their school district, learning to balance work and family, or feeling inadequate when it came to their decision-making abilities, mothers with high socio-economic placements are experiencing complicated and distressing feelings surrounding their familial roles. There is a long history constricting standards that make even the most progressive mother feel guilty for embracing her liberated status. The next section will explain, in-depth, how intensive mothering principles have survived decades of improvements for working women and mothers and how the intensive mothering culture was prevalent among many of the participants, whether or not they were aware of it.
Navigating New Expectations

Guilt and Boundaries – The concept of intensive mothering was not defined until 1996, well after the establishment of the American middle-class in the mid-1900s. Sharon Hays sought “to define what she saw as a new emerging ideology of motherhood whereby the methods of appropriate child-rearing are constructed as “child centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays 1996:8). Each of my participants fell on a broad spectrum of intensive principles. If I had to illustrate this range, Alexis would fall on the far-right side of the line, fully embracing these principles as she devoted much of her life and time to her family. On the opposite end of the spectrum would be Annie and Liza, who explained their egalitarian relationships and how they and their husbands work to ensure that responsibilities are equally shared and that they have time to themselves. A majority of the mothers experienced intensive ideals through expressions of guilt or a greater pull towards their children than they had felt prior to COVID. The dominant standards of intensive motherhood are social problems that “produce guilt, a need for connection and support…. [and] a longing for validation” (Newman and Henderson 2014:484).

Figure 3: Intensive Mothering Spectrum

Source: interviews with participants 2021

16 Alexis and Naomi both dominate the right side of the spectrum, fully embracing intensive standards. It was also worth noting that these mothers, despite living in a one-income household, lived in the highest economic class, compared to the other women in this study.
Many of the mothers explained tactics for confronting such ideals which in turn, made parenting during COVID a more pleasant experience. Each working mother explained how they came to establish necessary boundaries throughout quarantine: when to work and when to spend time with their children. This helped to ease the anxieties and shame produced by all-consuming tendencies of intensive mothering. For example, when I asked Whitney to describe her average day during COVID, she explained the benefits of setting boundaries, “I know when to shut it off. I know when that, you know, at five o’clock… I cook dinner, get things done around the house. That way I’m more productive at work during the day.” Liza, Rachel, and Annie had similar boundary systems to Whitney, each designated a few hours a day to be with their families and complete any household responsibilities like laundry and cooking. This helped the women be more productive throughout the day and eased any anxieties about household tasks; they knew that at some point, everything would be completed.

Rachel, Liza, and Annie (all directors within large non-profits) benefitted from the creation of professional and familial boundaries. The ability to do so is definitely a privilege not every woman has been able to practice throughout the pandemic. Each of the working moms has the physical space in her home to put distance between her and her children in order to create a private workspace. The children mentioned in this study are all independent (for their ages) and do not require any special assistance or education. The mothers are comfortable knowing that their children do not need a constant helping figure. However, that did not implicitly alleviate any anxieties. Rachel specifically stated that in the beginning of quarantine she felt a great deal of pressure to be more active around her home, whether it be laundry or cooking. She said,

*I think it’s really hard... I feel like, I’m home, so I should do should [do more]. Like the pressure of being home. I’m like, “oh, well maybe... I should be doing laundry more... I actually think it’s a confusing time to be a working professional and home... cause it’s like conflicting messages... if I’m home, I should be doing more stuff for the house.*
Rachel and her husband, Brady, have since designed a schedule to ease these anxieties, though these “pressures” are still felt sporadically. Throughout our conversation, Rachel expressed how thankful she was for Brady’s involvement and selflessness when it came to their family and how she would not have been able to juggle everything herself. The two seldom stray from their strict schedule, much like Liza and her husband, which is significant to how the mothers have experienced COVID thus far. Intensive mothering standards were implicitly present in both women, but they used a system of boundaries, along with support from their partners to tackle the stresses of the working-mother dichotomy.

Liza never explicitly stated that she valued intensive ideals. Rather, she explained how, for the first time since having her children and working, she felt a pull towards them throughout her workday.

*I will feel... a pull, which I never felt when I was in my office before... I just don’t think about my kids, you know, like it’s a different world, they’re in school and I’m at work. and now it’s like, “Oh I could go down and have lunch with them!... I could see them during the day” ... it’s just different, it’s a pull on me because I have a choice to make... and I never had that choice before.*

Liza and the other working mothers have little-to-no separation from their children while they work from home. As Liza explained, the mothers now face choices that they’ve never had to consider like creating their schedules so that they can make their children lunch or spend time with them while they are on break from school. This confusion that Liza is experiencing in whether or not to spend more time with her children is indicative of intensive mothering.

“Because motherhood has traditionally mandated that women stay home with their children in order to be good mothers, women have experienced role conflict\(^{17}\) as they attempt to balance the

\(^{17}\) Role conflict occurs when mothers participate in the work force. It “arises when pressures in one’s work role interfere with participation in one’s family role or detract from the quality of life experienced in the family role” (Steiner et. al. 2019:251). This phenomenon is a direct effect of intensive mothering- the working women feel guilty
relative rewards and costs of children and work” (Russo 1976:147). Liza has been able to combat this guilt and newly felt pull towards her children through time-blocking. She promised herself that come five o’clock, she would log out of work and “hang out” with her two children. Liza also designated thirty minutes to herself in the evenings, away from screens, where she usually reads or practices the piano.

Much like Liza, Annie experienced a new-found pull towards her children. Before the pandemic, Annie employed a sitter during the afternoons, Monday through Friday. Since the start of the pandemic, she only has outsourced help one-to-two days per week. The majority of Annie’s guilt was centered around her youngest daughter, Maya (9). She said, “I would say Maya… suffers the most because we’re not actually paying attention to her… she doesn’t have enough homework and she doesn’t have anyone paying attention to her.” Annie’s children were the only ones in this study who went to in-person school full-time which greatly impacted how Annie was able to work throughout the day. Her guilt did not set in until the afternoon, when Maya came home. In eras of great uncertainty such as this one, mothers feel an “enormous individual responsibility for making choices that will facilitate their children’s physical, emotional, mental, and material well-being” (Brown 1996:30). Without the help of a regular sitter, Annie experienced a new sensitivity surrounding leaving her children by themselves while she worked in the afternoon. There was less of a need for Annie to establish work/family boundaries throughout her workday because her children are not home. However, she explained in our interview that she feels as though she is “almost ignoring” Maya in the afternoon so that she can finish her work responsibilities. The benefits of outsourced childcare is discussed at...
greater length elsewhere my research, but it is apparent that without the fulfilled role of babysitter, Annie has experienced internalized intensive mothering sentiments.

Cassidy also spoke of establishing boundaries with herself and with her children; however, the boundaries she set for her children seemed to benefit her husband more while the rules she created for herself seem to rely on her children’s schedules. Cassidy explained how in the beginning of COVID, there were little-to-no boundaries as she and her husband, Jackson, struggled to complete their own work while taking care of their three young kids. Cassidy and Jackson established a closed-door policy for their children, meaning that when the door to the home office is closed, the kids know not to disturb unless it is an emergency. But the home office belongs to Jackson, not Cassidy:

*Everyone knows that, you know, if the office door is shut, you cannot go in... you have to be quiet... daddy’s [working from] home. ‘Cause I could, they don’t even know I work basically. I’m like, always on my phone but like, it’s like, if daddy’s out of the office and he wants to play with the, and he wants to... do whatever with you, that’s fine. But for the most part, they know what the expectations are.*

Put simply, the closed office door policy signifying “do not disturb” only benefits Jackson while Cassidy works on her phone and laptop, often next to her children as they do their schoolwork. Jackson’s ability to create a separate workspace from Cassidy and their children makes completing his work much easier, whereas Cassidy has trouble beginning her day unless her kids are fully prepared for school. She explained further,

*So, before I can even [begin work], even to talk to someone form work or log-on, it’s like, are the kids dressed or still in bed? Do I know what the kids are doing today? What times are the zooms? Like, my husband isn’t getting any of that.*

Cassidy did not express anger, per se, over the inequitable effects of the boundaries she and Jackson created but did express some frustrations over the daily production of getting her children ready for their day before she can begin hers. “A majority of mothers say they are
primarily responsible for managing childcare tasks throughout the workweek, such as preparing meals, supervising homework, and even monitoring playtime with their child(ren)” (Catalyst 2020:3) even if they do not fall on the extreme right of the intensive mothering spectrum.

Trusting Others – In my study, one of the most critical signifiers of intensive mothering was the inability to trust others in raising her child(ren). Alexis and Naomi firmly stated that they were the only people (besides the occasional help of their husbands) they trusted to care for their children. The women explained how when they stopped working before the pandemic, coincidentally both in 2015, they did so because they wanted to be with their children when they were young. Alexis said,

*It’s easier for me to be home and not have to juggle... I want to be there... with my kids while they’re small, cause they’re growing up and then that’s it... So, I wanna like have time with them. I also have, like, I don’t love other people taking care of my kids... I’m not comfortable with it.*

Alexis stressed the importance of being with her four children while they were young so that they could rely on her throughout their day. Before COVID, Alexis’ day was fully consumed with drop-offs, pick-ups, and numerous afterschool activities. Alexis participated in what Damaske identified as “concerted cultivation” in which middle- and upper-class parents “devote themselves to... shuttling children to multiple afterschool activities and are involved in

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18 Alexis and Naomi are both in rare socio-economic positions where their husbands make well above the average annual salary (the Bureau of Labor statistics stated that in the first quarter of 2021, the average weekly salary for men in management, business, and financial operations was $1,741 per week). If the women were to continue working, they explained how they would be spending their salaries on childcare, rather than “saving” money and doing the work themselves. “Persistent earning differences in the labor market mean that it makes ‘economic sense’ for men to prioritize financial provisions” (Fox 2009:153) while implicitly putting women in an inferior position within their homes. Alexis and Naomi both explained how there were no “real” conversations about them returning to work. Their families could rely on only their husband’s income which perpetuated intensive mothering standards within their homes.

19 The term originally coined by Annette Lareau in *Unequal Childhoods*. This practice creates “robust sense of entitlement [and] plays an important role in institutional settings, where middle-class children learn to question adults and address them as relative equals” (2011:2)
minute details of their children’s lives” (Damaske 2013:436). During the pandemic, Alexis’ stressors have multiplied as she has little time alone and is worried about her children’s development; however, she refused to hire outside help. She added, “I have high standards,” which seemed to justify her intensive mothering perspective. At multiple points during our conversation, Alexis presented feelings of “perpetual inadequacy” which is inevitable in most intensive practices. Alexis no longer focused on herself as her entire identity was reconstructed around her children (Newman and Henderson) prior to the pandemic and these feelings have only worsened throughout COVID.

Although she seemed to have a much more positive outlook on life during COVID, Naomi mirrored Alexis’ decision in leaving work to become fully emerged in her children’s lives, rather than have a childcare worker’s assistance. She said, “I trust myself more. I also wanted to be home with them when they were little… I actually like it.” It was important for Naomi to be home with her children while they are young. She even expressed fear for the day her children would no longer want to “hang out” with her although they are all below the age of ten. Naomi expressed that she had experienced some feelings of inadequacy but not at the same rate as Alexis. I discuss this further in a later section, but Naomi knew that this tendency to feel inadequate was because of the disparities in childcare in her home. She does significantly more child work than her husband.

On the spectrum of intensive ideals, Rose would fall on the left side, not embracing said standards. Her situation was irregular as she was the one to work outside her home and start her own practice while her husband balanced a remote-working status while assisting with their children’s home-schooling needs. I was impressed by the couple’s equitable positioning but was struck by Rose’s use of gendered language as it signified internalized intensive ideals. Even
those in the most egalitarian relationships expect their partners to practice intensive parenting which is clear in a couple’s vocabulary (Damaske 2013). When I asked Rose and her husband, David, how the division of childcare labor has played out, accompanied with the stresses of having to work full-time, David said,

David: Now im juggling my job, plus making sure the kids are plugged in with school remotely as a result, you know, being on top of their assignments.
Rose: He’s Mr. Mom
David: [interrupting her] Mr. Dad!

This small exchange between the couple is a clear indicator of Rose’s internalized intensive ideals. United States’ culture expects mothers to be the most involved parents, so, by calling David “Mr. Mom,” Rose is insinuating that the only figure responsible for the constant presence in a child’s life is a mother. The only way David could assume the role of primary caretaker during the school day was if Rose referred to him as a feminized figure. If Cassidy were to hear this exchange, she would argue, as I am doing now, that such language is harmful to mothers AND fathers as it only perpetuates the idea that mothers should be the sole beneficiaries of all childcare responsibilities. Cassidy explained her frustrations in how fathers are regarded as care providers when she said,

I think the pressure to fill so many roles are incredible...like, people say “Oh yeah, my husband’s babysitting my kids today.” No! he’s not babysitting. He’s the father of the kids and like, that sentence is so normal for someone to say.

Cassidy standards, but this time with her children. She explained how teachers regard parents in a zoom-class:

The teacher is never saying, like, “where’s your dad? Can you have your dad help?” ... the teacher is also saying “where’s mom?” ... I feel like wearing every single hat possible and I might be failing miserably... but I’ve never had more on my plate.
Educators are more likely to tell their students to ask for the assistance of the mothers, rather than their fathers, which inherently teaches children of all ages that the mother is the one responsible for all aspects of their well-being. This notion only adds to the stresses of parenting during a pandemic, as mothers are being pulled away from their non-familial responsibilities. “During COVID-19… mothers are more than three times as likely as fathers to be responsible for most of the housework and caregiving… there’s an assumption in a lot of families that the woman is the primary caregiver. Kids literally walk past their dads to go to their moms to ask for things. The pandemic has highlighted how disproportionately things fall onto women” (McKinsey et. al. 2020:18). Even though Cassidy does not hold intensive mothering practices dear, the cyclical conservation of such ideas within her children’s institutions creates feelings of “perpetual inadequacy,” which Cassidy actively protested throughout our conversation.

This sense of inadequacy, although seldom, was prevalent in all of the working mothers. In much of the literature I studied prior to conducting this research, I noticed a pattern for the importance of working and non-working women to remain productive and practice a regular form of self-care, so I asked the moms.

Productivity – My interview with Rose was one of my shortest in length but her answer when it came to productivity was informative and comical, “coffee, coffee, and more coffee!” Having opened her own practice in the middle of the pandemic, she was working longer hours and felt a great need for an increased caffeine intake so that she could balance her work-family life. Caffeine was not the only aspect that kept working mothers on-track during their work weeks. Each working mother sat down with their husbands at the beginning of every week and mapped out their schedules: who had a meeting and when, who would be with their kids during homework, and who would cook dinner? This practice is in direct contrast to what Fox (2009)
found in their research. Fox stated that pervasive parenting ideologies forced women to follow traditional coupling arrangements and while this is certainly true for mothers in positions similar to Alexis and Naomi, Liza, Rachel, Annie, Whitney (and for the most part, Cassidy) worked to ensure that all parenting expectations did not implicitly become their responsibilities. Rachel explained it well when she said,

*Anytime that I’ve been able to sort a plan ahead of time and get some meals planned, I feel productive... ‘cause then I’m like, “okay, I know what the plan is,” or like... Tuesday is breakfast night, like, that makes me feel productive.*

Whitney described something similar when explaining how she used “time-blocking”. She said,

*What makes me feel productive during the day, is that I’ve adopted time-blocking. I used to have instant message, emails, phone calls, everything bombard me, and I would skim the surface and multitask. What helped me is that I focus now... I stopped checking my emails constantly or having those notifications on... I put my phone on do not disturb and have become more focused and more impactful in what I do versus being constantly bombarded and distracted with everyone interrupting me.*

Turning off her notifications and being able to focus on one task at a time, allowed Whitney to spend more time with her family and she felt less of a pull towards her children if she was working and vice versa. Working from home has introduced new challenges for working mothers as they work in a closer physical proximity to their children. “In response to the pandemic, many businesses are adopting work-from-home and telecommuting options on a wide scale for the first time… which disproportionately effects working women, who struggle to combine their careers and childcare needs” (Alon *et al.* 2020:3-4). These new obstacles were lessened if the mothers held an authoritative position within her occupation and had supportive partners and outsourced care which helped to shoulder parenting responsibilities equally.

Rachel was also extraordinarily humble in explaining how self-aware she has been throughout COVID and acknowledged that having help, whether it be from her husband, her
sitter, or her work assistant has been crucial to her success\textsuperscript{20} throughout COVID. She explained further,

\textit{Delegating makes me feel really productive. Like, really giving things to my secretary and being like, “okay this is stuff I can’t get done today but if you could do it…” and even if it’s the littlest thing, delegating it off makes me feel good.}

Along the same line of delegating, Alexis explained how, for her, productivity was signified through facilitating her children’s daily routines. She said,

\textit{I guess I feel productive if I make a doctor’s appointment, or I, you know, make an appointment or do something, arrange something with the house... that’s, I guess, when I feel productive, I’m like, “oh, good I finally got her that checkup appointment,” or whatever.}

For mothers like Alexis, the question of productivity involved her children. She did not answer the question pertaining to herself and what she did independently throughout the day. It became a clear pattern that the stay-at-home mothers answered most of my questions, whether it be about productivity or outsourced care, through the lens of their children. Because mothering has become their full-time occupation, intensive beliefs were the prevalent standard in how they understood themselves through our conversations.

Many of the mothers experienced productivity in helping their children, regardless of whether they worked or not. “In two-parent households where only one parent works in the formal labor market… usually the mother is likely to assume primary childcare responsibilities during coronavirus related school closers” (Alon \textit{et. al.} 2020:3). Cassidy explained productivity through helping her oldest daughter, Caity (first grade) with schoolwork. She said,

\textit{I mean, working with Caity on school, it’s like, it makes me feel a lot better than letting her watch like YouTube [to learn] ... but like, making sure that, you know, academically, she’s where she needs to be. That makes me feel good and productive.}

\textsuperscript{20} Success is, of course, relative. By this, I am implying that she has had a somewhat smooth transition into COVID-life.
Cassidy answered through the lens of her children which surprised me as she was one of the strongest participants in her positioning of independence from her children. Despite my initial shock, her answer is understandable as most of children’s schooling has become the mother’s job. Helping Caity with school became one more thing Cassidy can check of her “to-do” list at the end of her day.

Naomi expressed similar anxieties to Cassidy around the education of her children and how ensuring their progress in school makes her feel productive. She said,

So, throughout the weekdays, if I can get my kids, like, if they have learned something throughout the day... because it’s really hard for them, I think, to learn virtually... So, I’m doing a lot of like, “oh, you didn’t do any writing at all today?” like, “you didn’t pick up a pencil? That’s nice, cause you’re in kindergarten and you have to learn. So, let’s like, let’s sit and write a letter to your grandmother.” So, I think I’m picking up a lot of the academic slack that COVID has stolen from them a little bit... I feel productive if they have learned something in the day, if they’ve been able to get through the day without breaking down about the use of the computer...I feel productive because I think my role is, like, a facilitator of everybody right now.

Naomi, like all of the mothers within this study, has become the main facilitator of their children’s education, whether it be ensuring that they are on the computer when they need to be (and sitting with them) or assisting with homework. This is an extremely taxing role that has added to the myriad of frustrations mothers are facing during COVID. Luckily, Naomi is confident in her teaching capabilities, as she used to be a teacher herself. This was not the norm throughout my participants and seems to be a great privilege; Naomi is confident that she can make up what her children are missing from an in-person education. Fulfilling the role of teacher comes naturally to Naomi and it crucial to how she has felt productive throughout the pandemic.

Selfcare – A large aspect of intensive mothering is a feeling a “perpetual inadequacy” and an inexplicable amount of guilt when mothers want to take time for themselves away from their children and families. When mothers experience intensive ideals, whether it be during a
pandemic or not, “they no longer focus on themselves, but instead, they reconstruct their identity such that their children comprised the center of their world” (Newman and Henderson 2014:482). COVID has created new anxieties for people around the world and mothers have experienced new stresses when it comes to their children and their personal lives. Taking time for oneself was imperative to “staying sane” throughout the pandemic thus far. Every respondent, no matter her working status, used exercise and daily walks as a form of self-care, and often escape from her family. Alexis said,

> I guess I have a little space for myself. The foundation of that is my daily walk just to get outside... I think there’s something really, really rejuvenating... you know, feeling the breeze and hearing the birds... it’s regulating, I think, to the body and the mind.

Alexis was able to experience peaceful silence, the opposite of what she experiences at home with four young children. Many of the mothers used these walks to keep up with friends, whether it be talking with them on the phone or organizing a small group to walk in at a safe distance. Rachel was part of an exercise group prior to the pandemic and meets with them every Saturday morning. Her face practically lit up as she told me about it:

> It all comes down to exercise... I have a workout group that I’ve been working out with, it has been six months and we’ve taken it outside. It’s super early. I have to leave the house at six in the morning to get there on time. We work out in the parking lot in downtown Mountain in a garage, but that is super-self-care because I drive there, and I can listen to whatever I want.

Not only did Rachel enjoy going to her group to socialize with those outside of her immediate family, but she also reveled in her thirty-minute drive alone, where she could listen to whatever she wanted or sit in silence.

> For all of the mothers, exercise was considered a necessary element of their daily routine, but it was only the working mothers who expressed an ability to practice some of their hobbies. Each mother has the financial means to afford new workout equipment (Whitney discovered a
new passion for Peloton) throughout the pandemic and other tools or resources needed to participate in said hobbies. Alexis and Naomi both stated that they found it near impossible to take time for themselves and have given up on the idea all together. Alexis said, “I don’t have time for that anymore.” This came as a surprise as the women who had to balance a work and family relationship also ensured that they made time for themselves. Cassidy explained how, to “mentally shut off” she’ll watch reality TV and indulge in her favorite drinks:

I love wine, so I try to, like, let myself have a glass at the end of the day... I binge watch, you know, trashy TV just to get my brain to turn off and just- being able to think about someone’s problems versus my own.

Being able to focus on other problems or transport oneself into a different universe was also beneficial to Liza and Whitney who gave themselves thirty minutes to an hour of screen-less time where they read. Whitney said, “I read a lot of books that are not about work or kids to turn myself off”. Liza’s love for reading was similar as she could choose subjects that did not pertain to her daily life. She is also found time to pick up piano for the first time since college. She said,

I started taking piano lessons during COVID... I mean, I’ve always played piano, but I haven’t had formal instruction since college and so that has been amazing for me, just, like, reenergizing me intellectually.

Liza and the other working mothers found time between their paid occupations and their familial responsibilities to care for themselves and free themselves from intensive parenting.

Working Gave Mothers Purpose – Before Alexis left her career as a psychologist, she was passionate about the work she was doing. She expressed guilt surrounding any aspirations of

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21 This tactic is not specific to the difficulties of mothering during the pandemic. In her 1984 writing, *Reading the Romance*, Radway described reading as the “simple event of picking up a book” which “enabled them to deal with the particular pressures and tensions encountered in their daily round of activities” (Radway 1984:169). Although Whitney and Liza did not disclose the specific genre of book they prefer, reading became a function for them to “diversify the pace and character of their habitual existence” (Radway 1984:172) through quarantine.
returning to her field. The guilt that Alexis felt around returning to work was centered around spending time away from her children; she felt guilty for wanting to do anything else than be their mother, her most prioritized role. After describing how she “only jokes” about returning to work in the future, she said,

> It would be really nice to go back [to work] ... it’s just easier for me to be home and not have to juggle... also, like, I want to be there with my kids while they’re small, ‘cause they’re going to grow up and then that’s it... so, I want to, like, have the time with them... I also, I don’t love other people taking care of my kids. I have babysitters who come for a few hours here and there, but for someone to be all day with my kids, like, it’s just not something I’m really comfortable with. Anyway, I was thinking that I could go back part-time. You know? I miss it.

There are several intensive mothering factors holding Alexis back from work, despite her having loved her career. She does not trust others to help raise her children, her husband provides financial incentives for her to remain home, and she feels guilty for wanting to split her attention between work and family. “Mothers may experience some form of guilt associated with work-family decisions, as they attempt to live up to “good mothering” standards – standards that are time consuming and personally demanding” (Damaske 2013:438).

Some of these feelings were prevalent in some of the other mothers but to a much lesser degree. None of the husbands I spoke with or were mentioned expressed similar sentiments. “Mothers worry more than fathers that they can’t support their child(ren) with school tasks as much as they need to. Mothers are also more likely than fathers to feel guilty when working because they are not able to attend to caregiving responsibilities” (Catalyst 2020:8). Liza, who did express a new feeling of guilt and “pull” towards her children throughout COVID, explained how working kept her grounded. She said, “I’m really happy to be a working woman.” Liza and her husband made it a point throughout their COVID-life to ensure that she could continue to work, solidifying Liza’s passion for her occupation while also giving her children the attention
they deserved. Being a working woman was a source of pride in all of the working mothers as it garnered independence from the traditional familial model that limits women’s autonomy in realms outside of the home.

Cassidy, who has experienced frustration with how some traditional practices have presented themselves throughout COVID, reflected on her work and how grateful she was that it put her role of a working mother into perspective. She explained,

*If anything, I think [COVID] has made me superwoman; like, I feel like I’m wearing every single possible hat and I might be failing miserably, but I’ve never had more on my plate… I had a great year at work, and it just makes your focus on what you have to do versus parents that don’t work or parents that have so much free time, they get, they get lost in so many stupid minutia details where, you know, it’s just-like, stay in your lane, do what you have to do…. But I think, yeah, the pressures are crazy. Like women just have so much on their plate, especially working ones… I guess never underestimate a woman.*

Throughout COVID, Cassidy has observed significant differences in how her working-mom friends have experienced life during the pandemic versus her non-working friends. She is explicit when she stated that her non-working friends “get lost in so many minutia details,” which only adds stress to the already tedious role of motherhood. Having responsibilities away from her three children has kept Cassidy grounded throughout her years as a mother, whether or not the world is in crisis. Cassidy’s perspective is in direct contrast to what Naomi expressed earlier about having watched her working friends suffer professionally because of the pandemic. Of course, every woman is experiencing the unequal economic effects of COVID differently, but it is telling that the working mothers are thankful for their position as working professionals, while the stay-at-home mothers expressed opposite sentiments. There may be a slight bias in the women’s positionality, but it is clear, based on the participants in this particular study, that working women who have a significant amount of socio-economic privilege have experienced
motherhood with more ease during COVID than the non-working mothers who experience the same amount of privilege, if not more.

Despite experiencing internalized intensive mothering ideals throughout COVID, each working mother stated that she loved being able to work and that it gave her a sense of purpose. The ability to work was made possible by her network of outsourced care and a (somewhat) equal relationship with her husband. For many of the mothers, having responsibilities away from their children and families helped keep them sane during the pandemic. Cassidy was happy that she had other tasks to focus on, other than the “stupid minutia details” of her children’s schedules. For Cassidy, working was a way of staying true to herself as she is able to establish independence from her children. When the mothers continued to work full-time throughout the pandemic, there was more of an understanding for time constraints and what needed to take priority in their family’s lives. Rachel expressed a similar sentiment when she explained how working despite the challenges produced by COVID has been beneficial to her and her family. She said, “I know that I’m a better mom when I’m working and having something else to think about.” Having some separation between herself and her children has been beneficial to Rachel and her family because they are able to “appreciate each other more” when they do spend time together.

Rachel and Cassidy provided similar sentiments on how continuing their work despite the strains of childcare during the pandemic have been favorable to them and their families. This was a consistent motif among the working mothers. Having the opportunity to give their work their full attention helped to ease some of their COVID-induced anxieties and put some separation between them and their children. Naomi, however, stated that she was happy that she did not work because she observed how her friends who continued to work after having children either
“lose their minds or have to stop working.” It is evident that each mother is experiencing and combatting COVID-produced difficulties in ways that best suit their specific positions. Liza echoed both Rachel and Cassidy, as well as Naomi’s mentioned mom-friends when she explained how continuing her work has affected her life throughout the pandemic. “I love and appreciate [working] and I feel really lucky… it just puts a different kind of psychological strain on me.” Liza did not hold back when explaining how working has created a new kind of mental stress as she has felt conflicted over dividing her time between work and her children, despite being in the same house. In our interview, Liza stated that this phenomenon definitely fluctuates and knows that if she was faced with the decision to leave work, she would never do so. She was aware of how her work impacted others and was proud to continue it throughout COVID.

The ability to work has made the mothers feel stronger in their capabilities to balance the tiresome dual role of working motherhood. Having the time to work on something larger than herself and her family, reminded Rachel of her passion for her career and acknowledged that it made her a better mom. She said,

*I know that I’m a better mom when I’m working and like having something else to think about… yeah, I’m a better mom with that separation. I can appreciate my kids more.*

Separation and transition have been essential to how Rachel and the other mothers have experienced COVID. Having scheduled time throughout their week to work was crucial to their success as employees and mothers. Supportive and dependable partners like Brady, were also fundamental in working mother’s achievements. The ability to work not only benefitted Rachel and the other working mothers, but it also benefitted their family’s ability to live under one roof for an extended period of time and practice some independence and in turn, appreciation for one another.
Working is not only beneficial to the woman in those professional roles, but also to the women’s children. Hansen stated:

Theoretically, a mother’s employment might be thought of as being negatively associated with child development because it deprives the child of time spent with his or her mother, impeding bonding between mothers and infants and perhaps slowing brain development... increases in educational attainment of parents and maternal experiences in the labor force are positively associated with the improved ability to stimulate and educate young children” (Hansen et. al. 2009:89-90).

When children have two working parents with high degrees of education, they are more likely to obtain the same levels of education, if not higher. This finding was prevalent throughout Annie’s interview as she explained how working from home has opened her two daughters’ eyes to what it means to work.

Being proud of one’s work was apparent in each working mother. Annie noted how working throughout the pandemic not only benefited her and her own sanity but found it important for her daughters to see what is means to be a working woman. She said,

*What’s been interesting... is that particularly the time when my kids were home, they got a sense of what it actually meant for me to work, like work used to be a place where mommy went and kept me out at night, which never really bothered them... I think it was eye-opening for them. I think they saw... how I felt about work, how hard I work, how passionate I am, the good that it did.*

Annie has grown to appreciate how working from home has opened her children’s eyes to what Annie would regularly do in her office. She is able to talk with her children about what she does, and they have a better understanding for her position and all that it entails. Her oldest, AJ (13), has even asked to stay up-to-date on Annie’s work as her appreciation for Annie’s position within her organization has grown. When children, especially girls, have two working parents, they are more likely to obtain higher levels of education and in turn, are more likely to participate in the paid force than those who have one working parent (Hansel et. al.). For Annie, working throughout the pandemic has been meaningful as her daughters have seen that she is
more than just their mother and how she makes a significant impact on their community. Annie was not shy in listing some of the negatives in adjusting to working from home but stated that she is content with how her working situation has unfolded. It is likely that Annie, along with the other working mothers, have been able to continue their work from home because they are not the sole providers of childcare. The next section examines how the presence (or lack thereof) of husbands/fathers has impacted the women’s experience of motherhood throughout COVID.

*Establishing Autonomy through the Dependence on Outsourcing*

Outsourcing childcare and housework were essential to how the mothers have experienced COVID thus far, which is a great advantage not experienced by mothers across the United States. There was an apparent relationship between outsourced childcare and egalitarian relationships: Annie, Rachel, and Liza (who lived in the most equal partnerships) all relied on some form of outsourced assistance. This may be due to the recognition of how taxing parenting and working can be on a parent, especially during a pandemic. These two factors were not solely dependent on whether or not the women worked professionally, but rather on the women’s comfort level with bringing people into her home during a pandemic. Within the mothers who employed regular assistance, there was a range in quantity of hours and services completed by third parties. Alexis did not employ babysitters or nannies but did have a cleaning service work in her home five days a week. Many of the other mothers hired a housekeeper for weekly or bi-weekly cleanings. Naomi was the only mother who did not employ any housework. She said, “my house is a mess!” but was stern in her decision to limit her family’s exposure to non-immediate members in as many ways as possible. Prior to the pandemic, many of the women relied on the help of older family members for childcare assistance. Cassidy lives near her
mother and aunt, who would pick her children up from school when needed and care for them while Cassidy worked from home. Whitney and Naomi relied on their parents and in-laws to do the same. The three mothers discontinued the help of their older relatives to keep them safe from possible exposure. They have also decided to not employ other help from younger sitters and nannies to be as safe as possible and either do the majority of the childrearing themselves or with the help of their partners, as described in the prior section.

Figure 4: Frequency of Outsourcing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Babysitter/nanny</th>
<th>Alexis</th>
<th>Naomi</th>
<th>Rose</th>
<th>Annie</th>
<th>Liza</th>
<th>Rachel</th>
<th>Cassidy</th>
<th>Whitney</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1-2 days/week</td>
<td>5 days/week</td>
<td>5 days/week</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housekeeping</td>
<td>5 days/week</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1 day/week</td>
<td>1 day/week</td>
<td>1 day/week</td>
<td>1 day/week</td>
<td>1 day/week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: interviews with participants 2021

Managing/Facilitating Care – Some husbands were persistent in their wives hiring some form of outsourced care, whether it be for their children or homes. Alexis explained how, instead of her husband making time to be present in their shared family life, he insisted that she hire help. She said,

*He doesn’t have time to help me, but he wants me to have help, so, he insists that, like, we have a maid... so, for the last few weeks, I had hired someone, actually, we have, like, a cleaning service that comes once a week... I offered, the, um, the women who is the employer of that group to come three hours in every evening and she cleans the dishes. She does the laundry and all that.*

Alexis and her husband employed a regular cleaning service for daily assistance with dishes and other menial tasks which has alleviated some of the intensive pressures Alexis has felt during (and before) COVID. Alexis seemed almost embarrassed to reveal this information, which indicated heavy intensive mothering ideals as women and mothers are expected to do everything themselves. Without the help of her husband, cleaning her whole house and caring for her four
young children was near impossible, but with a third-party cleaning service, some of the intensive expectations placed on mothers like Alexis were alleviated.

Cassidy has kept her housekeeper employed throughout the pandemic, paying her for a weekly service, but has not had any childcare assistance. Jackson has recognized Cassidy’s struggles in the past year and has suggested that the family employ an au pair. They planned to do so, but ultimately decided against it out of fear of bringing a stranger into their home. When it came to hiring a babysitter for a few hours per day so that Cassidy could work, she said,

*It’s something that he always, like, threatens because we always like, we don’t have another care provider where I like, I don’t have a nanny... I work when school is in session and then we had the baby, I worked when he napped.*

Jackson has noticed and is sympathetic towards Cassidy and all that she does for their family but was unable to be equally involved throughout his workday. He has been persistent in his objective in hiring outsourced care: so that Cassidy can work without worrying about her children throughout the day. Cassidy relayed no hesitation in others helping her raise her children. Her resistance was purely based on CDC restrictions, rather than the intensive belief that women should endure all childcare responsibilities.

**Balancing Expectations** – The three women with consistent childcare (and housework) all acknowledged how the role of a babysitter has made a positive impact on their lives throughout COVID. Annie, Liza, and Rachel employed an outsourced party throughout their work week which has eased some of their anxieties surrounding childcare during the pandemic. It is also interesting to note that these three women have supportive and involved husbands who each did a fair share of childcare throughout a given workday. Perhaps their husbands acknowledged that even with two active figures, the role of the parent is all consuming and outsourced assistance
was necessary in retaining professional and personal autonomy from their children during COVID.

Before the pandemic, Annie would employ college-aged sitters from a local university to pick her younger daughter up from school, pick her older up from her bus stop, and supervise the two until Annie arrived home in the early evening. Since the spring of 2020, Annie and Justin decided against the college demographic because of the rate coronavirus spread among college students. Now Annie employs a slightly older woman once a week to pick her daughter up from school and “hang out” with her until either Annie or Justin have completed their work. Annie was grateful for how independent her children are but longed for the days where she could hire consistent help again, just so her girls do not feel lonely. Unlike Annie, Liza’s preferred babysitter-type is an older woman with some child experience of her own. For years, Liza has worked with an older woman in her neighborhood who has children and grandchildren in several towns nearby. At the beginning of the pandemic, Liza and her husband discussed limiting their exposure to their sitter to keep her safe and so that she could see her family during quarantine. However, Liza’s school district has been inconsistent in their plans to make school in-person, so she needed someone who would be flexible with her children’s evolving school plans. She explained,

*We still have our sitter, our nanny who comes and picks them up and she’s here, you know, for the rest of the afternoon until I’m done working... but to be able to have to figure out childcare so last minute, and for like, a week at a time or two weeks at a time, depending on what those last-minute school plans have been so hard.*

Liza and her husband needed someone who would be able to adjust their hours depending on whatever the school district decided, and their long-time sitter was willing to do so. Liza mentioned how when her children were off from school for Martin Luther King Day, she too was off from work so gave her sitter the day off as well. She explained how, although she adores her
children more than anything, she would never be able to leave work because of how exhausting that one day turned out to be. She said,

*I couldn’t be... a stay-at-home parent... I had all day with them to plan different things and oversee all those things... it was too much- too much to worry and think about.*

Liza showed no hesitation in explaining how tedious the role of a stay-at-home mother can be and expressed gratitude for having both a sitter and a full-time job that she loved.

Rachel was in the same camp as Liza, knowing that her job mattered too much for her to leave and that being a stay-at-home mother was not the role she envisioned for herself. Rachel and Brady noticed how difficult parenting had become during COVID; as the only authority figures in their children’s lives now, much of their discipline and boundaries have fallen on “deaf ears.” Brady, especially, mentioned how important outside authority figures are to children and that having to be the only ones to instill discipline and regulations has been trying. Rachel and Brady have consistent care, five days a week and feel lucky that they have been able to do so thus far. Rachel said,

*He’s essentially here, like, five days a week, four and half to five hours a day... when we hired him, we were like, “oh, we think maybe fifteen hours a week,” and then every week, we realized that we needed more and more, and it was just better for Brady and me to have the help in the house. So, we’re going broke paying for a sitter.*

The couple is grateful for their sitter and have been able to work at home with relatively little disturbance. However, Rachel did state that they are paying a great deal for assistance, but she is not willing to sacrifice their babysitter. This financial sacrifice is a significant sentiment but is ultimately a privilege experienced by these mothers and one that is not accessible to all working mothers across the United States. Having outsourced childcare is a significant factor in Rachel’s success throughout COVID, both as an employee and as a mother. As I have stated in a previous section, Rachel knows that the ability to work makes her a better mom and having a consistent
sitter is symbolic in how the dual roles of working and mothering have been in conversation with one another through the pandemic.

There was certainly a relationship between having a more balanced, egalitarian relationship and hiring outsourced figures. When there was a clear understanding and appreciation between partners and their needs, the hiring of a babysitter or housekeeper went without question. For Cassidy and Whitney, the decision to not hire a regular sitter was based on COVID restrictions, not due to intensive principles or a lack of support from her husband. For the mothers who embraced intensive principles, there was less encouragement from their partners to hire outsourced support. When both parents were integrated in their children’s schedules while working full-time, there were no mistaking the difficulties of childcare perpetuated by the pandemic. Having a more balanced relationship with their husbands was a dependent factor in the hiring of outsourced child- and homecare.

Negotiating with Partners

Bourdieu was not the first theorist to identify women’s roles within our social chasm, but his clarification of the feminized figure’s function is one the most widely cited in our contemporary world. My research is no exception:

*Women quite naturally take charge of everything concerned with aesthetics, and more generally with management of the public image and social appearances of the members of the domestic unit – the children of course, but also the husband, who often delegates his choice of clothing to his wife. It is also the women who see to and look after décor of everyday life, the house and its internal decoration, the element of gratuitousness and 'purposefulness without purpose which always finds a place there... being assigned the management of the symbolic capital of the family, women are quite logically called upon to transport this role into the company, which almost always asks them to provide the functions of presentations, representations, reception and hospitality’*(Bourdieu 2001:99-100).
Here, it is clear that the delegations of women’s roles in the symbolic capital of the family creates codified positions that often exclude men from the role of caretaker. Much like intensive mothering, there was a spectrum of father’s involvement within the familial structure that has been continuously affected by COVID. The father’s involvement seemed to depend on whether or not the mother worked and what their schedules allowed for. Spousal relationships and the negotiation of parental responsibilities have an extensive history of male domination and female subordination within the familial structure. In 1978, Ernestine Friedl published *Human Nature* which explained the arrangement of gendered roles and expectations within the home. Male dominance with his home and his culture at large was dependent on the amount of resources he provided for his family and could sell for a profit. The fewer goods he could provide, the more egalitarian and familial life and society would be (Friedl 1978). Although her research focused on hunter-gathering societies, Friedl’s main research objective could be applied to my participants. In households like Annie’s and Liza’s, where both parents worked and provided financial resources for their family, there was a greater balance of domestic responsibilities.

Below is an illustration of the husbands and their engagement/participation in care work within their homes. This line almost mimics that of the intensive mothering comparison; however, Rachel still felt some exhaustive mothering demands much more than Annie.

![Figure 5: The Husbands in the Homes](image)

Source: interview with participants 2021
Husbands of Stay-at-Home Mothers – There is an implied uneven distribution of childcare responsibilities at play when a mother does not work professionally and instead spends most of her days with her children. This was the case long before COVID, as the Pew Research Center found that “in households where the father works full time and the mother works part time or not all, the distribution of labor, when it comes to childcare and housekeeping is less balanced. These moms take on more responsibility for parenting tasks and household chores than those who work full time” (Pew Research Center 2015:1). COVID has only amplified the disproportionate distribution of childcare labor because children are now spending more time in their homes. Alexis explained that even though her husband is no longer commuting an hour into Manhattan every day and has made an office for himself in their home, there have been no changes in his efforts to care for their children throughout the day. She stated, quite clearly, how when she does ask for help or he volunteers, he becomes resentful:

He’s a trader… he manages people and like, it’s just really challenging, especially now that everything is remote… he’s the kind of guy where he, like, he’s a people pleaser, but, so, he’ll help, but then he’ll be resentful about helping, you know, and I’m like, “you don’t need to do this” but he’ll do it. And then he’ll be mad about it, that kind of thing. So, I actually would prefer him to continue, you know, to leave the house [for work].

At several points throughout our conversation, Alexis explained how tired and overwhelmed she has felt during COVID and that her husband’s reticence towards her and their children’s needs has only added to her frustrations. Nevertheless, she consistently excused his behavior because of his stressful job. The position that Alexis continuously found herself in because of her husband’s lack of support fueled her intensive mothering principles as she pushed the narrative that she was the only person capable for the job of caring for her children. When I asked Alexis if she would ever consider going to back to work, she said that she thought about it but knew that
it would be hard because she would need to make all childcare arrangements herself because her husband would be “too busy” to give it much thought.

Naomi is in a similar position to Alexis, but she did not sugar coat her situation and was not shy in relaying her grievance towards her husband’s absence in her and children’s life. Naomi’s husband works as a financial analyst for a hedge fund and when asked about the changes her husband’s career has faced because of COVID, she said there were none. When I asked her to elaborate on the unequal distribution of parental responsibilities, she explained,

*There aren’t any changes, no. Not currently. I mean, I don’t think there ever is, for anyone that I know. It’s always like that, you know, like when I was working, ‘cause I worked when I had my first child until she was four, when my younger one was born and I was working part-time because I had to take care of her too... I mean, there’s always an uneven balance.*

Even before COVID and before she left her teaching position, Naomi still assumed the majority of childcare responsibilities. Now, she is able to give one area of her life her full attention, rather than feeling stretched thin. Naomi listed everything she does in one day, from waking her children up, feeding them breakfast and lunch at different times (according to their different school schedules), laundry, making their beds, vacuuming, and folding everyone’s laundry including her husband’s. “Parents in the United States have nearly doubled the time they were spending on education and household tasks before the coronavirus outbreak, to fifty-nine hours per week from thirty” (Cohen and Hsu 2020:3). Mothers, especially those in positions similar to Naomi and Alexis, are spending an average of fifteen more hours on childcare than fathers which greatly impacts how they have experiences motherhood throughout COVID-19 (Cohen and Hsu 2020).

*Husbands of Working Mothers* – Some of the women had very similar, positive experiences throughout COVID with their husbands. When thinking about the line graph
Cassidy explained how he is “one of the most hands-on parents” and loves to spend time with their children but, the majority of their children’s schedules are managed by Cassidy. She said, “I think household things, we’re equal, but in managing the kids’ schedules and like… it falls on me and controls my day.” When I asked Cassidy to elaborate on “household things,” she explained how Jackson does the dishes every night, does an equal share of laundry, and “manly things” around the house. Cassidy was thankful for the help she received from Justin around the house but struggled to complete her own work throughout the day due to the homeschooling and emotional demands of her children.

The division of childcare work is imperative to how working mothers are experiencing life throughout COVID. “For families where both parents are home through this period juggling work and childcare, fathers are assuming primary or shared roles that have an impact on the division of labor and entrenched gender roles post-crises. These shifts will need to be intentionally built and solidified” (United Nations 2020:15-16). The UN found that in more equal marriages, fathers have been more present in their family lives throughout COVID, as they are not working outside of the homes. The fathers in the UN’s study, as well as my own, were more involved in the routines of their children prior to the pandemic, whether it be cooking meals or helping with homework. The creation of arranged (and even) parenting roles in COVID greatly impacts how mothers continue their work throughout the pandemic and how they position themselves in their homes and occupations will be impacted in years to come. Liza and Annie, 22

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22 Unfortunately, I did not catch this phrase during our interview, but during the transcribing phase of my research, I was struck by the gender-stereotyped language because Cassidy valued egalitarianism. She stated how she did not like how men were regarded as “babysitters” and that they should be viewed as equally responsible parents to mothers. The explanation of “manly tasks” implies some gendered way of thinking about the distribution of household labor.
both in leadership positions at a non-profit, sat down with their husbands at the beginning of every week to outline their schedules so that pickup times, Zoom log-ins, and any other activities their children participate in are accounted for. If Liza knows she has a meeting that will last longer than her average workday, her husband, Michael (a dentist) knows not to schedule anything on that particular night so that he can be home and resume his role as parent. She said,

*We set up our schedules so that we, like... the days that I get to work by seven, he gets there later and stays until nine or so... if on those days that I’m working by four or 4:30, he is not getting home until, probably 7:30 or eight... we have control over our schedules that way.*

Because of Michael’s occupation, he cannot work at home but both he and Liza ensure that he is around their children just as much as she is. The ability to outline each other’s schedules so carefully is a great privilege. Every working mother and father in this study are in senior level positions, meaning they have few people above them and have control over their days; this would not be possible if Liza or Michael (or any other couple mentioned) held low-status occupations. The couple feel it is important to have some separation from their children so that they can work, which in turn, makes them excited to come home at the end of the day. This is similar to how Annie explained her experience of “mapping out” her and Justin’s week. She said,

*We just sit down every Sunday and kind of map it out, who’s getting who, when and where... I’m very fortunate in that way and that he’s my biggest cheerleader... he is always willing to help, although, it’s not actually help, it’s like, doing his part.*

Annie expressed how thankful she is for Justin, that he is a very supportive husband and involved father. She did note though, that what Justin considers “helping,” is what Annie regards as “doing his part.” In considering the differences between “help” and “equal responsibilities,” there is a clear difference in how each of the women in the study, including the stay-at-home mothers, regard the role of their husbands as fathers. Naomi and Alexis weighed everything their husbands did for their children as a rare, off-hand moment of help to them, rather than them just
embracing the role of fatherhood. This resentment certainly added to more negative experiences in COVID, compared to Annie and Liza in more egalitarian relationships. These women, along with the mothers in similar situations have had a much more pleasant familial experience throughout COVID. Annie explained how she and Justin surely have had their moments of disagreement in the past year, but she would not change their situation. She explained further, “the fact that he hasn’t literally made me want to rip his face off on a daily basis, I think, you know, shows the strength of our marriage.” I don’t think this expression needs much explanation, but the mothers who lived in more egalitarian relationships experienced COVID with a greater ease than those who did not.

Making Up Where the Other Lacks – The remaining three mothers, Whitney, Rose, and Rachel, described their relationships as “egalitarian” but the division of childcare labor was done so differently, compared to Liza and Annie. For each couple, “egalitarianism” took a different form. For Annie and Liza, responsibilities were divided equally. Rose and Rachel were both in irregular situations as their husbands assumed a majority of childcare while they worked throughout the day and while Whitney accounted for her marriage’s egalitarian status, it was not in the same fashion as the mothers mentioned above.

For instance, Whitney’s husband, a police sergeant, undergoes a schedule change every few weeks. Like Liza and Annie, Whitney and her husband also map out their parental responsibilities based on which of them is working and when. However, there are weeks at a time that Whitney’s husband is out of the house on duty for long stretches of time and cannot be home. She explained,

*My spouse and I, we’re very 50/50. We can’t be successful otherwise… we do it as a team… my husband, he’s sergeant of the police department… so, he works crazy hours and shifts… he’ll work the midnight shift, middle shift, and they change… he had fixed times for three months, so, there’s a steady consistency for the three months and then it*
rotates but during those times we are still flexible, and we work around each other’s schedules.

On his off-days or when he can be more hands-on with their children, Whitney’s husband is excited to do so. Whitney explained further how when her husband is home during the day, he makes sure that their children are fed lunch and are doing everything necessary for school. There are months at a time where the distribution of labor is unequal because of Whitney’s husband’s position, but she stated that when her husband is home on a regular basis, the everyday tasks and responsibilities are split equally. This is not quite what I would consider egalitarian, as Whitney does the majority of childcare for months at a time, but she was firm in her stance of being in an equal partnership despite her husband’s unreliable schedule.

Rachel’s husband, Brady, also had an irregular schedule. Instead of his job as a therapist taking his time away from his children, he is able to schedule his day around his family, a rare privilege of occupational autonomy. Rachel admitted to having been extraordinarily overwhelmed throughout COVID and was more than grateful for Brady’s flexibility and understanding for her needs as an individual and their needs as a family. Rachel said,

I have not been awesome with schooling, like at all, it’s totally been Brady’s job... I’m emailing all day. I’m zooming all day. So, I don’t have the time to do the other stuff... Brady’s running his own practice so there’s the pressure of that but [he] also has a level of flexibility that I don’t have... Brady tried to structure his day more around the kids, actually, more than I do, admittedly, except for like pickup times.

Rachel has accepted pick-up and drop-off as her responsibility23 and in that time, Brady is free to use the house for his sessions. Throughout much of their children’s school day though, Brady has adapted his schedule so that he can assist his children during school and mealtimes. Prior to the pandemic, Rachel’s position within the non-profit was demanding but since last spring, her job has become all-consuming as she works to take care of larger communities, especially in

23 Although her children are in zoom-school, they take private swim and tennis lessons a few days a week.
traumatic times such as COVID. She stated her love and thanks for Brady several times throughout our conversation and acknowledged that much of her professional success throughout COVID would not have been possible without Brady’s attentiveness to their children. “Working mothers are somewhat more likely than fathers to say it’s difficult for them to balance work and family, and this is particularly the case for mothers who work full time” (Pew Research Center 2015:2). It seems obvious that when fathers are involved figures in their children’s lives, the mothers are able to advance in their occupations.

Rose has also accomplished a great deal throughout COVID and would not have been able to do so without her husband’s professional sacrifices. Like thousands of other Americans, Rose, an audiologist, was laid-off at the beginning of the pandemic. Instead of staying home and waiting to find another position, Rose began her own audiology practice and has been successful despite the shut-down. When I asked her to explain the division of labor within her home during COVID, she said,

*I think, for me, it’s a little different because my husband has really taken on the responsibility, now that I can’t be home. He was commuting into the city and not he’s not, so, he’s much more involved in our kids’ education and activities after school and making sure that they’re there for it and things are being targeted because I started a practice, I don’t have the same time that I used to.*

David has become the sole-care provider during the work/school week so that Rose can be fully present and involved at her new practice. The couple explained how in the past, Rose has had to step into the role of exclusive care provider so that David could advance in his career. He is doing for her what she had previously done for him; they make up where the other temporarily lacks so that their children feel no shift in comfort or attentiveness. When I asked Rose if there was a conversation about David becoming the daily care provider while she worked elsewhere, she said that there did not have to be:
We have a really good strong marriage and there’s a very clear understanding of what each other needs in order to be successful and, you know, if I can finish off my work early than I do, and I head home and try to help out, but my husband is very supportive.

There was no conversation but rather, an understanding of what David would do so that Rose could thrive in her professional life. The couples shared mindset is an unmistakable indicator of an egalitarian relationship and how such attitudes are imperative to how working mothers have experienced COVID thus far.

With their husbands’ support, working mothers were more likely to experience the changes brought on by COVID with much more ease than the stay-at-home mothers. Alexis stated that although much of the monotony of her every day routine has not changed because of COVID, she has had to adjust to the silent presence of her husband within their home. She knew he was there, in his private office in a separate wing of their home, away from her and the children and saw him just as little as she did before the pandemic. Through their verbal accounts, Alexis’ and Naomi’s husbands showed little appreciation for the never-ending and all-consuming support that the women provide for their families, while the husbands of the working women were involved and celebrated all that their wives accomplished for their families and themselves. While each of the women’s situations differed in some way, sharing responsibilities and having an affectionate and understanding partner was crucial to working mother’s experiences.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Intensive mothering standards and practices, whether it be before or during COVID, were much more prevalent in the stay-at-home mothers than the working mothers. Some of the

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24 It is worth mentioning that although David’s professional sacrifices for his wife’s success during COVID are praiseworthy, it is no different to what women have historically done for their husbands for decades! Men’s’ roles within their homes have certainly changed: they can be more vulnerable and loving towards their children than generations before have been, but their sacrifices are still regarded as monumental while the same is expected of wives and mothers.
working mothers did display such principles, but they were not explicit in letting the belief of all consuming motherhood become their norm. Mothers like Cassidy and Liza, who worked full-time throughout the pandemic, were aware of the disproportionate responsibilities expected of women and pushed back on them while Alexis and Naomi (stay-at-home) embraced the expectations. At several points throughout my interview with Alexis, she seemed to contradict herself when explaining how she was the only one she trusted to raise her children. She made it clear that she did not trust babysitters and even her husband to supervise her children, yet she said, “It takes a village to raise a child. We have nothing left.” Whether Alexis’ village was her children’s school and instructors or extended family members, Alexis has relied on others to supplement childcare at one point or another. From an outsider’s perspective, it seems as though mothers like Alexis feel an immense amount of guilt for needing childcare assistance. When intensive standards were present in homes like Alexis’, “mothers are unable to see the bigger picture of how their frustrations and guilt might be somehow related to larger social structures” (Newman and Henderson 2014:487). These arrangements make any possibilities of working outside the home feel as though the mother is choosing something greater over her children. Alexis and Naomi both expressed how they want to be around their children while they “are little” because “they’re only young once, then what?” Fears and concerns like this made an outside career and the coronavirus added stresses to the two mothers’ intensive lives.

There is a great deal of privilege prevalent throughout my research. Socio-economic status was the root of many of these mothers’ (somewhat) positive experiences throughout COVID. Being in wealthier classes, each mother was able to hire outsourced child and home care without having to sacrifice other aspects of their lives. Besides what United States’ culture would normally classify as privilege, there was a great advantage in all of the working mothers’
occupational lives. Each woman held a high position within their occupation/organization and could arrange her schedule to best suit her needs. Many of the women had office assistance or a team under them who could step in when they needed assistance. This is certainly not the case for every working woman in COVID and is a great asset in these working women’s experiences since the beginning of the pandemic. Another aspect of these participants’ privilege is the spaciousness of their homes. Living in wealthier neighborhoods, these women all live-in single-family homes where they have separated spaces from their children; most had separate home offices and rooms in their homes where they could be alone. These mothers did not have to care for extended family members and were strict about not letting non-immediate members into their homes. Having a large house for their single families was critical in establishing some autonomy from their family members throughout their day – a privilege that is not common for other families and has been imperative to how these mothers have experienced COVID.

Among my participants, it was only the working mothers and their husbands who employed some form of outsourced childcare. In fact, several of the fathers suggested that the mothers hire outside care, whether it be for their children or their homes, so that not all home- and childcare responsibilities became the women’s burden.\textsuperscript{25} Hiring an outsourced care group or individual carries more weight now than it did before COVID because of CDC guidelines that restrict family’s physical involvement with outside figures. The mothers who hired babysitters and cleaning services have set rules for everyone to follow, whether it be wearing a mask or getting regular tests to prove that each party is negative and can safely be around children. The added stress of testing and mask-wearing around their homes seemed to pay off for the mothers who welcomed outsourced care inside. Annie, Liza, and Rachel were able to work,

\textsuperscript{25} Instead of lending a hand…
uninterrupted, throughout the day without having to worry about what their children were up to. The mothers who did not employ sitters but hired cleaning services on a regular or semi-regular basis, were able to work longer hours and spend more time with their children without thinking about completing menial chores around the house. Having outsourced assistance for their children and home alleviated some of the stresses perpetuated by COVID and allowed for the mothers to have some autonomy from their domestic responsibilities.26

A supportive and equally responsibly husband was critical in how mothers have experienced changes in motherhood. Throughout my writing I refer to the term “egalitarianism” frequently. I used it both in contrast to traditional views on motherhood as well as gender expectations within a home. Of course, egalitarianism looked different based on each participant’s situation but was evident when couples consciously worked to split responsibilities equally. In partnerships like Rose’s, and in some instances Rachel’s, the husbands took on more childcare responsibilities than the women. I am hesitant to refer to this as anything other than egalitarianism, as women have made personal and occupational sacrifices so that their husbands could move forward in their lives for decades. Rose supports my hesitancy as she described putting her career on hold for some time so that David could advance in his career years before. As a culture, we tend to applaud men for doing what women are expected to do without a second thought, when we should strive to hold genders to the same expectations.

The husband’s involvement was a clear indicator of how overwhelmed and intensely involved mothers have felt throughout COVID. The comparison between Alexis and Naomi versus Annie and Liza are practically black and white. The two stay-at-home mothers who

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26 It should be acknowledged that all outsourced care was always arranged by the women, even if the husband thought it was necessary. She was responsible for interviewing and hiring babysitters and cleaning services, deeming if they were safe enough to bring into their homes. This is another added stress produced by COVID that only mothers (in heterosexual relationships) are experiencing.
practiced intensive standards with little support from their partners reported a more difficult experience than Annie and Liza, whom had egalitarian relationships and held equal expectations of their husbands. Although mothers like Annie and Liza did report some feelings of anxiety and upset, they were seldom, especially compared to Alexis and Naomi. Women in similar positions to Cassidy and Whitney, who practiced some intensive ideas while being aware of the U.S. culture’s disproportionate expectations of women, had involved husbands but still took on more of the parental responsibilities. Their husbands understood the difficult dual role of being a working mother, both to three young children, and were involved when they could be. Both Cassidy’s and Whitney’s husband were present in their wives’ and children’s’ lives when they were not working. During the workday, however, parenting became a one-person job while the women worked full-time.

In each interview with the mothers, I asked what they did to feel and stay productive during their day and what they did to practice self-care. While these questions did not specifically pertain to their children, it was my goal to better my understanding of how their lives have changed during COVID and what autonomous measures they take for themselves. Women may feel guilt for taking time for themselves away from their families because of our “cultural contradictions of motherhood” (Damaske 2013). Whether the participant worked or not, each mother’s self-care and productivity practices were largely informed by how intensely involved she was with her family and how much time she felt comfortable leaving her children with their fathers or sitters.

Before I started any research, I expected that there would be somewhat of a “grass is greener” attitude between the two groups of moms. I anticipated that the working mothers would envy the stay-at-home mothers because they did not have to juggle the working dichotomy and I
thought the non-working mothers would envy those who were employed because they had a means of escape from their monotonous routines. I was wrong. In many of my conversations, each woman expressed gratitude for her specific situation. Naomi was explicit in her praise for her position as she has watched her working friend’s struggle. When I asked her to elaborate on this, she said,

*I don’t know, you know what? I really love seeing and being with my kids... even though it’s kind of monotonous... I am the type of person that’s, like, very sad already about the time they’re going to not be with me, you know?*

Naomi cherishes her time at home with her children and is somewhat thankful that the pandemic forced her to slow down. She took her children out of their extracurricular activities, temporarily and is enjoying (most) of their time together. Both Naomi and Alexis expressed that they would never want to be a working mother amidst this pandemic while the opposite was said by every working mother in this study. I have quoted her many times throughout this paper, but Cassidy was strong in her opposition to discontinuing work during the pandemic. Having responsibilities away from her children gave Cassidy and mothers like her, a chance to practice autonomy from their families and remind them of what they were passionate about. The working mothers in this study all loved their occupations and would not give them up, despite the difficulties perpetuated by this pandemic.

Much of the previous literature and research I identify in this paper would agree with Naomi’s point of view. Cohen and Hsu predict that as COVID restrictions begin to lift and professional settings open to employees, it will be the husbands who will go back to work, leaving their wives and children at home. This will proceed the cyclical expectations of a woman within her home as “women who drop out of the workforce to take care of children often have trouble getting back in, and the longer they stay out, the harder it is” (Cohen and Hsu 2020:2) to
re-enter. Many of the researchers who worked with working motherhood before and during COVID conclude that mothers will continue to bear the disproportionate consequences of childrearing. Among my participants however, mothers who intentionally divided their responsibilities equally with their partners would never think of leaving their profession in this pandemic. It is crucial to keep the sociological imagination in mind when considering my conclusion: while the expectations of mothers are broadly defined at the cultural level (she must be intensely involved), every woman has experienced motherhood in the age of the coronavirus differently. The women in this study come from elevated socio-economic backgrounds and can afford to provide themselves with outsourced care and other supplements for home-life responsibilities. This is certainly not the case for every working mother in the age of COVID and is a great privilege during a time of mass panic and stress.

Through this research, I sought an understanding of how mothers of different occupational positionings have experienced motherhood throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. I spoke with eight mothers, six of whom worked outside of their home and two who assumed the role of the “stay-at-home” figure. Throughout our semi-structured conversations, I was able to comprehend how traditional gendered expectations are exacerbated because of the pandemic and have complicated the role of motherhood. I am aware that this research does not apply to every mother and is just a close look at one socio-economic group. However, it is clear the intensive mothering standards are prevalent in these affluent, stay-at-home mothers, more so than the mothers who work. How each woman approached motherhood was crucial to her experience throughout COVID. The women who were the primary care providers with little-to-no assistance, and consequently did not work, struggled to establish individuality as a mother. I can confidently conclude that the mothers who worked outside of their homes before the pandemic
and continued to work virtually, have experienced COVID in a much more positive fashion. There is no doubt that they have faced their share of adversities, but each woman had a supportive husband and supplemented care that eased intensive expectations of “good” mothering. When the household was operating under equal expectations between the mother and the father, the woman could do more than just parent. She was able to practice her career, and care for herself, and her family while living through COVID-19.
Appendix

*Interview Questions*

1. Describe your daily routine before COVID.
2. Describe your daily routine during COVID.
3. How has the shift from professional work to come care been?
   a. This question is only applicable if she worked in the professional sphere pre-COVID
4. I’m trying to understand how the pandemic has affected a woman’s identity so, I want to ask you, are there any changes in your identity or what you find meaningful as a woman? As a mother?
5. What are some things that make you feel productive?
6. Is there a fair distribution of parental care in the house?
7. Was there a discussion about how stays home?
8. How does it feel to stay home?
9. What are some things you do for yourself/to practice self-care?
10. Have you hired outside care? If so, from whom?
11. Do you see yourself returning to the professional sphere or the physical office any time soon?
12. Any activity pods for your children throughout quarantine?
Bibliography


