

**“We’re Just Trying to Get Through It”: Looking at the Main Concerns of Mothers
During the COVID-19 Pandemic
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As we near the one-year mark of shutdowns and restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, I’ve started to reflect on the many ways in which the pandemic has affected my life, from the large-scale changes to my work and school environments to the miniscule adjustments surrounding my daily routine. When I transferred to Hamilton last spring, I was eager to dive into the various facets of a liberal arts college lifestyle, complete with intimate classroom discussions and participation in a variety of engaging activities. I enjoyed the chance to meet and gather with new-found friends in the bustling, crowded dining halls on campus, laughing and chatting over meals served on standard college dishware. Then, in the middle of March, the “liberal arts college life” I had anticipated and experienced unexpectedly shifted to something vastly different. Classrooms turned into “breakout rooms,” office hours became Zoom links in my Google Calendar, and socializing with friends happened only through screens of varying sizes. With the return to in-person education in the fall, my college experience evolved yet again, and the navigation of new safety rules was added to my list of responsibilities as a college student. Where on campus could I socialize safely? What would happen if I was listed as a close contact for someone who tested positive for the virus? What if I tested positive myself?

Depending on who you are, your initial answer to the question of “How has the pandemic affected you?” may look vastly different than mine. Perhaps you are a professor, and the stress of teaching and engaging your students through a virtual instruction space has defined your pandemic experience. If you are immunocompromised, you may find that the anxiety surrounding your daily interactions has infiltrated the majority of your time. My status as a college student enables me to see the world in a specific way: the regular environments I am exposed to and the perspective I have of them are overwhelmingly determined by this specific role within society. I have a multitude of other roles, as well: I am a daughter, a sister, a friend, an employee. And over the past year, the pandemic has cast its influence in some way over each one of these positions.

Over the past month, I had the opportunity to interview and study a group of individuals that have been significantly impacted by the pandemic. With the introduction of virtual schooling and quarantine demands, mothers have taken on incredible responsibility in managing the lives of their families, often assuming the administrative in their children’s at-home education while also navigating adjustments to their housekeeping routines and jobs. While sitting and talking with women from various ethnic, race, and class backgrounds, I was brought into the world of pandemic “mothering,” replete with anxieties about everything from personal chronic illness to creating adequate spaces for their children to participate in Zoom dance classes. Like me, their perspectives were primarily informed by a status that had taken on an entirely new definition with the onset of COVID-19, a status that was constantly changing with developments in national, state, and local guidelines.

When I asked these mothers the first question of our interview guide – “Can you tell me how the pandemic has affected you?” - some would sit back and ponder for a moment, while others would verbally exclaim “Wow!” or note, “That’s a big question!” The more I investigated the following responses, the more I was intrigued by the topics that immediately came to mind

for these women. What had been on the forefront of their minds for the past several months came tumbling out into the open, most likely for the first time. What I started to notice was that the topics they chose reflected certain patterns according to their social class. Although many personal experiences were expressed, two key overarching themes arose that threaded between members of similar class statuses, which I will share with you in the following sections.

Socialization

According to several middle-class mothers, the experience of feeling socially isolated was one of the most significant impacts of the pandemic. Over half of the middle-class women interviewed during the month of January expressed that missing in-person social activities was one of their primary concerns during the pandemic, be it a concern for themselves or for their children. When asked about the effects of the pandemic for herself and her family, Patricia, a middle-class mother of two elementary school students, mapped out the course of her pandemic experience through the lens of her ability to socialize with others:

So, in March, we had a shelter in place, couldn't go anywhere or do anything. And then, probably by May/June, we started having small groups. And then, all summer, we kind of stuck with the same group of people. And then, as our numbers [of COVID cases] got higher, we just decided to not really do anything at all. I think October was really our last socialization type group activities or anything like that. So, it's been up and down.

To preface this visualization of the pandemic through fluctuations in social activity, Patricia stated that she and the rest of her family members were “very social people,” which made the inability to interact with “normal” friends very difficult. A few other middle-class women used this same phrase – “very social people” - to define their own families, often listing the multiple activities their children participated in before the pandemic hit in March. Similarly to Patricia, Cindy, another middle-class mother, described the changes in her children’s socializing patterns:

And then, the time in the summer almost seemed like a break from it, because the kids were outside. You could play. We have a pool in our neighborhood. The kids could go to the pool. They didn't have their sports, but they still had friends and playing outside. And we go camping and hiking a lot. So we did all that stuff. We even went away for a week. So that led to it seeming like normal for a little while.

According to Cindy, the ability of her children to play outside with friends during the summer was equated with “normalcy,” or similarity to pre-COVID life. To her, the lessening of restrictions related to in-person social interaction gave her the feeling of having a “break” from the pandemic itself. This speaks to the overarching importance that middle-class parents place on socializing, of gathering with others and having their children engage with various extracurricular activities.

The experience of remote schooling was also framed with the perspective of socialization. For Elsa, a middle-class mother of both an elementary and middle school student, the implications of virtual education extended farther than academic aptitude:

But I think even just for their own socialization, it's been really tough. And I think that's the biggest thing, especially with my son, was the socialization he was really getting at school. And I

feel like he's going to be behind going into fourth grade with, not only the academics, but the socialization. And so that for me is a big concern.

Elsa's preoccupation with the lack of "socialization" that her son is experiencing through the process of at-home education indicates that middle-class parents view schooling as an important means of learning how to operate in the world and interact with others. From her perspective, schools are not simply responsible for educating children academically: they are environments through which children achieve specific markers related to social skills.

Through Bowles and Gintis' research on schooling in capitalist America, we understand that modern schools are set up to prepare children to step into adult work roles by socializing them to function well in the hierarchical structures found within modern corporations (1976).¹ The strategies used to accomplish this hierarchical stratification have been well-documented, from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital to Jessica Calarco's work on the ways in which children from different class backgrounds operate in the classroom (1983, 2014). In Calarco's study on learning and using class-based behaviors in elementary school classrooms, it is revealed that middle-class parents, primarily mothers, coach their children to seek assistance for themselves and to ask for additional support from their teachers, a mechanism that contributes to differences in school outcomes between middle-class and working-class students (2014). This current research suggests that middle-class parents have an increased awareness of the need for their children to practice navigating their school environments, understanding that this type of education will allow them to secure advantaged positions in their future school and work environments.

Employment

By contrast, not one of the working-class mothers interviewed this past month expressed that a lack of social activity was a fundamental concern for themselves and their families during the pandemic. Instead, the focus of their answers to the question "How has the pandemic affected you?" tended to revolve around worries related to their employment. Working-class parents were more likely to frame the changes created by the pandemic in terms of their employment status and resulting financial position, which is exemplified in the response given by Gabrielle, a working-class mother of four:

In comparison to most people, it hasn't affected us as much because I wasn't already working out of the home. My husband was, but he's an essential worker. He's a healthcare worker, so he's actually getting more work. But that's about it, regarding that. My children are learning remotely right now, so that's a pretty big change. But day-to-day life hasn't really changed. Our ability to get the things we need, or our income, or anything like that hasn't been affected.

From Gabrielle's perspective, those impacted most by the pandemic were individuals who experienced drastic changes to their jobs. Since her family had already made the adjustment to her not working outside of the home before the pandemic hit, her core feeling of stability remained unchanged, knowing that her family would be able to live on her husband's salary. Just as Cindy equated the ability to socialize with "normal," pre-COVID life, Gabrielle saw her own financial stability as a reflection of normalcy.

¹ Bowles and Gintis 1976

The importance that working-class mothers placed on job security led some of them to define themselves according to their employment status. The language that these women used to label themselves and their family members indicates the centrality of occupation in the lives of working-class families, which can be seen by Stephanie's description of her family:

Well, we are a two essential worker household. So there's four of us total in the house, my two kids, me, and my husband. Me and my husband are both essential workers, so we have worked through the whole thing, which has made it quite difficult.

Just like Patricia defined herself and her family according to social proclivity, Stephanie viewed her household through the types of jobs that she and her husband hold. Since both Stephanie and her husband must work outside the home in order to create a baseline of financial security for their family, the responsibilities they hold pertaining to their children are shaped by their occupations. For example, because of the expense of childcare, Stephanie's two children are watched by both her mom and father-in-law. Stephanie expressed her worry about exposing her family to the virus, but her overarching need to make ends meet kept her in her current job. Stephanie's experience suggests that working-class parents are more likely to be in positions where their financial security is in question during the pandemic, thus causing them to make personal sacrifices for the sake of financial stability.

Final Thoughts

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly made a significant impact in the lives of people all over the world. The research conducted with mothers over the course of this past month suggests that people perceive this impact differently according to social class. While middle-class mothers tended to define themselves as "social people" and express concerns related to their families' social activity, working-class parents defined themselves according to their employment status and emphasized their responsibility to create financial security for their families. Since the sample sizes for both middle and working-class respondents this January were relatively small, more research will need to be completed in order to create a clearer outline of perceptions of the pandemic according to social class.

References

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