The Gendered Challenges of At-Home Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

In mid-March of 2020, schools across New York state faced closures due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coupled with closures of many workplaces and a general move towards remote work, this unprecedented situation forced families to adapt to the new normal: school, home, and work were now all happening in the same space, at the same time. Parents could no longer rely on schools or outside childcare options to keep their children occupied. While each school district developed its own strategies of teaching children remotely, a common experience was an increased need for parental involvement in children's everyday schooling, which was particularly true for families with younger children.

This paper discusses the ways in which families have navigated at-home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. I focus on the ways in which families divide at-home learning responsibilities and how they explain those divisions. In particular, I focus on the experiences of working mothers and the challenges they face when trying to balance their employment with at-home learning responsibilities. I argue that explaining the gendered division of parenting responsibilities primarily through employment and convenience does not account for the experiences of most working mothers in the sample. Rather, essentialist gender ideas around caregiving and parenting remain salient, suggesting that gender remains the primary means of stratification in the family. Further, engaging with literature on intensive mothering and emotion work, I argue that women are disproportionately affected by the challenges of at-home learning and are held to higher parenting standards than men, which further exposes gendered inequalities in the family.

This paper is organized by two sets of research questions:

RQ1: How do families divide responsibilities around at-home learning and how do they explain those divisions?

RQ2: What challenges arise for working mothers trying to balance work and their children's at-home learning? How do they deal with those challenges?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motherhood and Employment

The overlap between motherhood and employment has always been a contested place in modern U.S. society. Damaske (2013) outlines two major shifts in women's lives between the 1970s and the 2010s. The first shift concerns women's increased contribution to the labor force. Not only are there more women working today than there were 40 years ago, but women also work longer hours and are pursuing increased work commitments. On par with that shift is one concerning an increase in mothers' time spent with children. Damaske discusses the tension that arises between increased workforce participation and increased mothering standards and argues that "the seeming incompatibility of motherhood and paid labor has led to cultural concerns about women's ability to adequately mother while working or to adequately commit to work while mothering." (Damaske 2013:438) In light of his tension, Damaske argues that for women, work/family decisions become moral dilemmas and further, that women face judgement whichever path they decide to pursue. Damaske further examines how mothers use language to navigate this double bind and avoid scrutiny. In discourse about motherhood, a popular notion is that any decisions around motherhood and childrearing should be made in relation to the child's

needs, rather than the mother's needs. Damaske finds that many working mothers subscribe to that notion and explain their decision to continue to work as the best one for the family, even if that is not the reason for why they chose to continue to work in the first place.

It is important to note that this relationship between motherhood and employment is shaped by race and class realities. In another article, Damaske (2011) discusses the ways in which gender, race, and class intersect to influence how women develop expectations about their future workplace participation. Through in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of women, Damaske found that middle-class women, regardless of their race, reported the importance their parents placed on education and future professional employment for their daughters and expected to continue working full-time throughout their lives. A similar sentiment was expressed by working-class Black women. On the other hand, working-class white and Latina women were more likely to expect occasional work, i.e. expected to work either part-time or stop working once married and with children. Damaske's study highlights how middle-class women and working-class Black women might face a stronger conflict between their motherhood and their employment. Because of the notions about women's employment that they learned early on in their lives, they expect to continue working for pay through motherhood, which places them at risk for scrutiny and moral judgement, questioning their ability to "adequately mother while working or to adequately commit to work while mothering" (Damaske 2013:438).

An example of an empirical study that sheds light on the conflict that arises between increasingly demanding mothering standards and employment was conducted by Haley-Lock and Posey-Maddox (2016). In the article, the authors discuss the pull that working mothers feel towards being physically engaged in their children's schools. All of the mothers in their sample

reported receiving "a consistent and strong message from a variety of sources" that being a helpful presence in their children's schools was important, expected, and a mark of a good mother (Haley-Lock and Posey-Maddox 2016:311). Using interview data, the authors further discuss how different employment situations shaped mothers' capacity for school engagement. They found that mothers in more professional positions were more likely to spend time on school engagement than did mothers in low-wage jobs, as they had more flexibility and autonomy over their work schedules. Despite this inequality, both groups of women faced significant employment trade-offs when they did find the time for school engagement. In order to accommodate for school engagement while working, the women in professional positions often had to accept lower pay, move from salaried to hourly pay status, or deal with increased spillover of work into non-work time. For mothers in low-wage jobs, having formal time off took the place of any schedule responsibility, thus forcing them to draw from their time off to accommodate school engagement, rather than slightly adjusting the start or the end time of their shifts. We can therefore see how the high expectations of modern motherhood force women into situations where they need to choose between their work and their children, facing sacrifices and scrutiny no matter which path they pursue.

Intensive Mothering and the Feminization of Carework

In her work, Damaske (2013) argued that the drastic increase in mothers' time spent with children that could be observed between the 1970s and the 2010s is tied to the rise of "intensive mothering" ideologies, a term first coinded by Hays (1996). Damaske describes intensive mothering as an ideal which expects mothers to be ever involved in the minutiae of their

children's lives and sacrifice their needs and goals for those of their children. This ideal, she argues, seems to be particularly salient in white middle-class families, and goes in hand with practices of concerted cultivation (Lareau 2002). Hays further argues that the current parenting ideal is "child centered, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive and financially expensive," making it available primarily to white middle-class families (Hays 1996 in Sherman and Harris 2012:65).

Christopher (2012) complicates the intensive mothering debate in her study. Through interviews with a diverse group of working mothers, she found that some mothers employed the "extensive mothering" strategy, in which they remain "in charge" of their children's daily lives, but delegate substantial amounts of day-to-day childcare to others. While such a strategy was prevalent across racial and class boundaries, it was particularly common in African American/Canadian mothers. Mothers remained the primary people in the family in charge of their children but were able to reconcile motherhood with paid work through this less hands-on, less intensive approach.

No matter which mothering ideal they subscribe to, mothers are held to increasingly higher standards, yet the same does not seem to be true for fathers. This could be partially because of how parenting and carework continue to be feminized, i.e. assumed to be natural parts of a woman's role. Damaske (2013) argues that these modern parenting dynamics stem from a historical division of "moral labor," wherein women were expected to take care of others through emotional attention, while men were expected to provide for others through paid work. There is a robust body of research that suggests that these historical ideas still persist today. Coltrane and Adams (2001) found that women in dual families not only spend much more time interacting

with their children than men do, but also that they are more likely to engage in child-centered activities (such as helping children with homework or having private talks,) while men were more likely to engage in adult-centered activities, (such as watching TV or playing a game together.) As such, gendered patterns of carework and education affect not only broad divisions of labor in the family, but also everyday parent-child interactions. Another study, by Gerstel (2000) found that women spent significantly more time providing unpaid carework for their extended family members and friends than men did, when controlling for employment. Additionally, both women and men used essentialist ideas about gender to explain women's "propensity" towards caregiving, using phrases like "it's in her/my nature." This shows that women are perceived as the ones who should engage in caregiving, no matter their employment status.

Carework is not only disproportionately expected of women, it also continues to be devalued. In their study of women in nursing careers, Bullock and Morales Waugh (2004) discussed the extent to which both paid and unpaid carework continues to be devalued, or even "invisible" in our society. The nurses in their study spoke about a dissonance they felt between their perceptions of caregiving as important work and the way their work continues to be underappreciated and underpaid in relation to other careers. Further, they spoke about the emotional and physical challenges that came with performing paid caregiving and then coming home to engage in what Hochschild (1987) refers to as the "second shift" – additional, unpaid caregiving labor that is just assumed of them and not perceived to be in any way taxing or demanding. The experiences of the nurses in this sample speak to larger societal notions which not only associate carework with femininity but further devalue everything that is even remotely

considered feminine, deeming it as less important and less worthy than what is considered masculine.

As such, while they're not the same, the notions behind intensive mothering and the feminization of carework achieve a similar end, as they present parenting and carework as primarily a woman's responsibility and further push women to sacrifice their needs and best interest for that of their children and families, in a way that is not required of fathers.

Emotion Work in Mothers

Another aspect of motherhood that is often unappreciated or completely ignored is the extent of the emotional labor that goes into it. Hochschild (1979) first defined emotion work as "the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling." (561) This could refer to either one's emotions or the emotions of someone else. Considered a subset of carework, emotion work is similarly heavily gendered. Erickson (2005) found that, on average, women in heterosexual marriages perform significantly more emotion work and do so more often than men.

Because of its gendered nature, emotion work is often found to be a significant part of motherhood, which was documented by Lois in her study of homeschooling mothers. Lois (2006) uses in-depth interviews to identify the emotional challenges that homeschooling mothers deal with when navigating the roles of a mother and a teacher. She finds that for many homeschoolers, the hardest part about homeschooling is the amount of interpersonal emotion management that they had to perform before education could take place (e.g. managing their children's motivation and feelings about school.) Additionally, the mothers had to engage in emotion work around their own feelings, trying to deal with burnout, frustration, and overall

emotional strain that came from trying to balance all of their responsibilities at once and fit into what they considered to be the ideal homeschooling experience.

Lois' (2010) research uncovers a subtype of emotion work that specifically focuses on manipulating one's subjective experiences of time. The author discusses various temporal emotion work strategies that the mothers in her sample employed to deal with the stress of time shortage. Through strategies such as eliciting nostalgia and anticipating regret, the mothers in the sample were able to shift their perspective to focus on the future moment in which they and their children were looking back fondly at the time spent together, which helped them justify and come to terms with the enormous amount of work they were putting into their children in the present moment. Adopting this perspective and committing stronger to mothering was deemed to be the more selfless choice, which further highlights the inherent sacrifice that is the foundation of intensive mothering ideals. Lois' research highlights the emotional challenges of motherhood and the labor that goes into dealing with them in a way that, again, is not required of fathers. As such, not only are mothers held to higher standards, but are also expected to put more emotion work into fulfilling their roles.

METHODS

In our project, we focused on five school districts within one central New York county: Dayton, Fairview, Greenville, Harrisburg, and Springfield (all names are pseudonyms.) These included rural, small town, and city districts of varying sociodemographic characteristics. For the purpose of this project, we wanted to interview parents who had at least one child in 3rd, 4th, or 5th grade. The participants were recruited by the primary investigator via email and flyers. The PI

contacted relevant groups, such as schools, parent-teacher associations, and major employers in the region to distribute information about the study. Both emails and flyers included an overview of the study as well as contact information of the primary investigator. The emails additionally included a link to a survey in Qualtrics, which asked basic demographic questions as well as initial questions regarding the family's situation in relation to at-home learning. At the end of the survey, the participants could indicate whether or not they wished to take part in an interview to elaborate on their experiences. The participants would leave their contact information and then the primary investigator, or one of the research assistants would reach out to the respondent to set up a time for an interview. Those who received the information about the study via flyers were encouraged to contact the primary investigator if they wished to take part in the interview, and a similar process followed.

Once the contacted respondents confirmed their interest in the interview, we sent them the informed consent form, asking them to read and sign, if they agreed. The respondents could fill out the form electronically and send it back, or physically print and sign it, and send us a scan or a picture of the completed form. The interviews were semi-structured in that we used an interview guide, but we also asked probing follow-up questions to encourage elaboration. As the situation was developing and certain pandemic-related restrictions were being raised, we adapted the interview guide to accommodate for these changes. The interviews were conducted via Zoom or phone, depending on the respondents' preference, and digitally recorded (upon receiving verbal consent from the participant.) The interviews were intentionally short (around 30 minutes) because of the time constraints we knew parents were under. Each participant who concluded the interview was rewarded with a $30 electronic Visa gift card for their time and had the option of

receiving the gift card electronically or via snail mail. The recorded interviews were then transcribed and coded using NVivo software and a codebook that we all developed and refined. During a trial round of coding, each of the research assistants coded the same transcript, which we then compared to check for intercoder reliability. Once any questions and concerns were settled and reliability was ensured, we moved onto the actual coding, wherein each of the research assistants coded between six to seven transcripts.

Over the course of the project, we interviewed nineteen parents from the five districts. All but one of our respondents were mothers. Eighteen of the respondents were in heterosexual marriages at the time of the interview, and one was divorced. Our sample was predominantly white, with one respondent identifying as white and Hispanic. Our respondents were between 37 and 51 years old, with the mean age being 43. The participants had between one and three children in their household, with most of them (10 out of 19 households) having two. All participants had at least one child in the 8-11 age range (as per our focus on 3rd-5th grade), and the age of the other children ranged between 5 and 15 years old. Finally, we determined socioeconomic status by considering both the education level and type of employment of the parents, which is consistent with categories used in previous research on social class, families, and schools (Calarco 2011; Lareau 2002). For the purposes of our study, higher-SES families are those where one or both of the parents have at least a four-year college degree and work in a professional or managerial occupation. Lower-SES families are those where neither of the parents meet the criteria. By these categories, eighteen of the families in our sample were higher-SES, and one was lower-SES.

Since for my individual paper I was particularly interested in how paid work influenced parents' navigating of at-home learning, I focused on partnered parents in dual income households. This decision left me with a sub-sample of fourteen families, as one of the nineteen respondents was not partnered, and four had no paid employment at the time of the interview.

FINDINGS

Division of At-home Learning Responsibilities

To understand the challenges that arise from trying to balance at-home learning with other responsibilities, we must first understand how families divide at-home learning aid. Table 1 provides an overview of the families in the subsample, identifying the parent in each household who is primarily in charge of helping their children with at-home learning, or if it is balanced between partners, and describing the employment situation of both parents.

Table 1: Parents' work arrangements and division of at-home learning aid

Respondent's Name	At-home learning aid	Mother's employment	Father's employment
Jessica	Mother (hands-on)	FT out-of-home	FT out-of-home
Kathrine	Mother (hands-on)	FT out-of-home	FT from home
Rebecca	Mother (hands-on)	FT from home	FT from home
Jennifer	Mother (hands-on)	FT from home	FT out-of-home
Melissa	Mother (hands-on)	PT from home	FT from home
Megan	Mother (hands-on)	PT from home	FT from home
Andrea	Mother (hands-on)	PT from home*	FT out-of-home
Kelly	Mother (hands-on)	PT from home	FT out-of-home
Sarah	Mother (hands-on)	PT from home	FT out-of-home
Heather	Mother (supervision)	FT out-of-home	FT from home*
Amanda	Father (hands-on)	FT from home	FT from home*
James	Balanced	FT out-of-home	FT from home
Mary	Balanced	FT from home	FT from home
Patricia	Balanced	PT out-of-home	PT out-of-home

* the respondent indicated that they or their partner were working a certain amount of hours in the survey, but then during the interview specified that because of the hands-on nature of their work, they or their partner have been unable to put in the equivalent number of hours a week during the pandemic (while their official terms of employment remained unchanged.)

As seen in Table 1, in ten out of fourteen households in the sample, the majority of responsibilities related to at-home learning fell on the mother. In all but one of these cases, the type of aid the mothers provided were primarily hands-on, i.e. involved physically being with their children and working with them on schoolwork, or otherwise helping them as necessary. In the remaining case, the aid was primarily of a supervisory nature, i.e. the children were able to work independently for the most part, but the mother was responsible for making sure their work was completed at the end of the day. This was the only case which aligns with Christopher's (2012) framework of "extensive mothering," which focus more on designating tasks and supervision, as opposed to the highly involved, hands-on intensive mothering.

Why is it that the responsibilities surrounding at-home learning fell disproportionately on women? Many respondents didn't provide any particular explanation for their and their partners' decisions. This is understandable, as we did not directly ask the respondents about this in the interview, but rather it came up naturally from questions about the organization of day-to-day life. However, when the respondents did offer an explanation, their answers could be grouped into two distinct categories: the employment argument and the 'better fit' argument.

The Employment Argument

The basic premise of the employment argument is that the parent who works fewer hours (or whose schedule is otherwise less demanding and/or more flexible,) is the one responsible for at-home learning. Melissa, a preschool teaching assistant working part-time, explained why she

was the one helping children with school while her husband was working full time: "It is understandable as I'm working part-time that I'm taking on more responsibility." In another household, both Amanda and her husband were technically employed full time from home, but the husband was not able to work the full-time equivalent of hours a week, because his place of employment was closed due to the pandemic and his work was primarily hands-on. As Amanda continued to work remotely during her regular hours, her husband took on the bulk of their children's a-home learning: "I would sort of go away for the rest of the day to work [at the home office], and my husband was really the one who was doing schooling."

As some respondents emphasized, the employment argument makes logical sense ("It's understandable.") However, knowing that in ten out of fourteen families, the mother was primarily responsible for at-home learning, we might start to wonder: are all of those ten mothers just working less than their husbands? In order to evaluate how accurately the employment argument maps onto the experiences of families in the sample, we can consider the parents' work schedules and see whether it is always the parent with the less demanding work schedule who assumes the primary responsibility for at-home learning.

Table 2: Parents' work schedule demands and division of at-home learning aid

	Division of at-home learning aid			
	Mother	Father	Balanced	Total:
Father's schedule more demanding	6	0	0	6
Mother's schedule more demanding	2	1	1	4
Similar schedule demands	2	0	2	4
Total:	10	1	3	14

Table 2 provides a count of all the types of schedule arrangements and the ways of dividing at-home learning responsibilities between parents. Work schedule demands were

determined by taking into consideration reported time demands (full-time, part-time,) mode of work (out of home, from home,) as well as any other information provided by the respondent (e.g. someone's partner is technically employed full time, but does not actually put in the full-time equivalent of work hours a week, because of the pandemic.)

Among the fourteen families, there was only one reported instance of the father taking up the majority of the at-home learning responsibilities (when the mother's schedule was more demanding.) In three instances, the responsibilities were balanced between the two parents (once when the mother's schedule was more demanding, and twice when the parents had similar schedule demands.) All of the remaining instances were of mothers assuming the majority of at-home learning responsibilities, regardless of their schedule demands.

The cases in yellow are those that logically flow from the employment argument, i.e. if the mother's schedule is more demanding, we would expect the father to do most of the at-home learning; if the parents have similar schedule demands, we would expect the at-home learning responsibilities to be more or less balanced between the two parents. As we can see, the only case where the employment argument logically maps onto the majority of the families' experiences is when the fathers' work schedules are more demanding – in all of those cases, the mothers were the ones who assumed the responsibilities of at-home learning. In the families where the mothers' schedules were more demanding, the employment argument accounted for only one out of four cases, and in the cases where parents had similar schedule demands, it accounted for two out of four cases. This leaves five out of fourteen cases (36%) which cannot be logically explained using the employment argument.

It becomes clear then, that while the employment argument logically makes sense, it doesn't account for the several instances where the parents had the same work arrangements (e.g. both worked full time from home) or where the mother's employment situation was less compatible with at-home learning (e.g. mother worked out-of-home, father from home), but where the mother was still primarily responsible for her children's at home learning.

One of those cases was Kathrine's household. Kathrine, an elementary school principal, continued to work full time outside of the home during the pandemic, while her husband would stay home with their three children, working full time. Even though the husband's schedule was less demanding, as he could do his work from home, the majority of the at-home learning responsibilities still fell on Kathrine's shoulders:

> And now, our day is similar in the sense that I get up and I'm in my office at school, so I come to work still a couple days a week and my husband is home in the home office all day with the kids. […] The 5th grader is independent, she gets her work done. The 3rd grader doesn't, so they have a lot of free time during the day and then *I get home around dinner time at 5 and then from like 5 to 9 is like our school at home.* So, that's when we're kind of doing a lot of the work.[1]

After a full day of work, Kathrine would come home and do schoolwork with her 8-year-old child who was not an independent learner. She did not address why her husband, who was working from home, didn't contribute to their children's at-home learning, neither during the day, nor after work hours.

Another respondent, Heather, continued to work full time as a registered nurse at a local hospital. As in Kathrine's case, Heather's husband also stayed at home with the kids. He was employed full time, but, because of the hands-on nature of his work (he taught masonry at a local

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[1] In this and all following quotes, any emphasis has been added by the author.

community college,) his job was on hold. While their children didn't need hands-on help when doing their work, Heather was the one to assume the supervisory role by making sure her children completed their work and leaving reminders for her husband:

> So I'm still working, I work as a nurse at the hospital so I'm gone for like 12 hours a day when I go to work so that's been a problem too because, you know, *I always have to leave reminders for [husband], like it always seems to fall on my shoulders.*

While the nature of their involvement differed, both Kathrine and Heather devoted time and energy to helping their children with their at-home learning on top of their rigid work schedules, and both described receiving little to no help from their husbands with more flexible schedules.

The "Better Fit" Argument

In the instances when the employment argument was not relevant, some respondents explained the divisions of at-home learning responsibilities by using the 'better fit' argument. Here, one of the parents was described as being more predisposed to help with at-home learning, be it because of their educational and occupational background, their personality, or their personal preferences.

Rebecca and her husband both worked full time from home, yet the husband was not at all involved in at-home learning. When describing her family's situation, Rebecca mentioned her occupation as a second-grade teacher as making her prepared for handling this new responsibility:

> [L]ike I said I'm a teacher myself. *Obviously, I help them with their homework and everything,* but they had already learned that throughout the day at school and then I would just help them a little bit here and there. […] [B]eing home with them I am able to help and teach them some little tricks I learned along the way, things that I've learned and understand that clicks a little bit faster for them. *So, I am enjoying the time I get to spend teaching my kids.*

Rebecca's experience as a teacher is definitely valuable in this situation, as she not only has experience teaching elementary students (her children are seven and ten years old,) but also is comfortable navigating educational institutions. However, she is working full-time and navigating changes to her own work as she teaches a group of 2nd graders. Still, she framed this decision as an obvious one ("Obviously, I help them with work and everything.") She additionally emphasized the enjoyment she gained from being able to spend more time with her children that way, to highlight that she did not perceive this as a burden, but rather an opportunity for more family time. Rebecca's account maps onto Lois's (2010) findings and the emotion work that the mothers in her sample would employ to reframe homeschooling as "quality time" with their children – something that they could later look back on and savor.

The previously mentioned Heather, a registered nurse at a hospital, explained her family's decisions in terms of the parents' personal characteristics:

> And the only thing I think- he's always sort of deferred to me was, as far as education stuff- you know, I might say to him, "Did [name] do all of her work?" – that's our younger daughter. Last night, when I got home, you know, "Did [name] finish everything?" and he's like, "I told her to, she said she did" and I'm like, "Make sure she did" because she goes outside to play, next thing you know I get home at 7 o'clock and I'm like "You were supposed to do this and you didn't" so I think *I tend to be more of a task-master when it comes to that sort of thing, he's more of a fun dad.*

By assuming the label of a "task-master," Heather was able to explain her involvement with their children's learning and frame it as part of her personality – a quirk rather than an obligation. At the same time, using the label of "fun dad" to describe her husband, she explained his lack of involvement in at-home learning, a decidedly 'not fun' activity. Focusing on personality attributes the parents' behavior as based on personal preference, rather than accounting for the

structures in place (such as gender) that influence the division of labor. Further, the idea that mothers engage in the more cumbersome parts of parenting while dads engage in the more fun parts is not just an isolated stereotype. This ties Coltrane and Adams'(2001) findings that "when compared to mothers, fathers are likely to spend a much greater proportion of their interaction time with children in play or leisure." (76) By referencing the stereotypes that stem from these gendered patterns of parent-child interaction, Heather was able to explain their family's situation without directly acknowledging the inequality apparent in it.

Of course, parents can feel more comfortable with certain labels than others, or have certain personal preferences, and as such, the 'better fit' argument is not necessarily invalid. However, this argument is limited, as it looks at individual actions without considering them in relation to larger institutions. Moreover, it is quite blatant that this argument only ever arose when mothers were explaining why they were taking on more responsibilities than their husbands, despite having more demanding, or similarly demanding work schedules. To fully grasp the extent of what it meant to navigate at-home learning on top of paid employment with little outside help, we will now turn to the second research question: what challenges arise from trying to balance at-home learning with paid work, and how do mothers navigate those challenges?

The Challenges of Navigating At-home Learning and Paid Work

All of the parents we talked with identified a plethora of responsibilities that come up around at-home learning. These go way beyond just helping children with homework: parents were reaching out to teachers for help and support, troubleshooting technology issues, and engaging in

emotional labor to manage children's stress about grades, among others. While the situation of each family is unique, and the mode of remote learning varies by school district as well as by teacher, each of the working mothers in the sample had to deal with at least a couple, if not all of those responsibilities, on top of their paid work and, in most cases, housework. The following section focuses on the experiences of mothers for two reasons: (1) mothers were disproportionately the ones doing at-home learning, and (2) all but one of the respondents in our sample were mothers. As such, not only were mothers disproportionately affected by these challenges, but also because of the characteristics of our sample, we were able to get a better picture of the mothers' experiences.

Temporal and Emotional Challenges

Perhaps the most obvious and the most prevalent challenge stemmed from the sheer amount of work that came with doing at-home learning on top of other responsibilities. Many respondents brought up feeling like there weren't "enough hours in the day" to do everything they needed. Jennifer, a high school English teacher working full-time from home, was taking on the majority of at-home learning responsibilities as her husband was working outside of the home. When asked what the most challenging aspect of the pandemic was for her family, Jennifer explained:

> I have three kids, and one in every building, middle school, high school, elementary school, and they all have a lot of work. An unreasonable amount of work and so *it's been very hard to balance all of their workload with my own workload, let alone house, dog, those kinds of things. [...] It's so bad.* Basically, I do 28 classes a day. All day long, if I really multiply my kids and my own. You know what I mean? *It's a nightmare.*

From Jennifer's descriptions, we can see that the challenge here is not purely a logistical one, but also an emotional one. Her use of phrases such as "it's been very hard," "it's a nightmare," highlights the emotional toll that this new situation has taken on Jennifer.

Not only were the responsibilities taking up too much time, it was also very hard to delineate and compartmentalize tasks, because everyone was now spending most of their time at home. This is a challenge that Megan brought up repeatedly throughout her interview, identifying it as one of the most challenging aspects of working and learning from home. Megan worked part-time from home as a leadership program coordinator at a local college. Her husband worked full-time and didn't really contribute to at-home learning, leaving Megan to deal with the bulk of the work. Megan spoke openly about the issues arising from a lack of clear boundaries between what was work, school, and home:

> *I think the blurred lines between school and work and home has been hard to navigate.* […] And I don't even know how to articulate that, but it's just- *it makes things so much more manageable to be able to delineate them*, so you can focus on this thing now, and then you set it aside and then you're gonna focus on this thing and then you set it aside *and now it feels like everything is happening at the same time.*

Megan's testimony highlights the difficulty that arises when all the responsibilities are constrained to one place: the home. Without clear spatial or temporal distinctions, all of the different activities and responsibilities start blending together, forcing mothers to constantly multitask and divide their attention between multiple areas, effectively dragging out the responsibilities that were too time-consuming in the first place.

This lack of clear boundaries combined with the added responsibilities often led mothers to experience role overload. In her study of homeschooling mothers, Lois (2006) identified role

overload as a type of role strain which "occurs when there are too many role demands, given the time allotted" (508). One of the respondents, Patricia, spoke very directly about the many different roles that parents are expected to fill in lockdown conditions:

> The other thing that I want to say is that due to the pandemic, parents have become teachers, coaches, friends, Pastors, lunch ladies, art teachers and PE teachers, recess monitors, etc. for their children. *It's a lot of roles to fill with no break and no babysitters.*

Indeed, what we learned in our interviews is that the mothers in our sample were juggling many different roles at the same time, perhaps the most prominent examples being: mother, employee, educator, homemaker. The sheer amount of responsibilities stemming from these roles, combined with the lack of clear boundaries which would help to delineate tasks, led to role overload, which Lois (2006) identified as one of the major factors leading to burnout in homeschooling mothers.

An additional challenge was another type of role strain, namely, role conflict. Lois (2006) described role conflict as a situation "when one role's demands directly interfere with another's" (508). Rebecca, a 2nd grade teacher, spoke about her challenges when trying to teach her children at home:

> [I]t's a lot different teaching, obviously, a classroom of kids and teaching your own kids. I don't know how many times I've said it but, "*would you talk to your teacher that way? Would you say no to your teacher?*" you know that kind of thing "*would you get up for snacks every five minutes?*"

In this example, Rebecca is trying to navigate the role of a mother and the role of a teacher at the same time. As a teacher, she is supposed to be somewhat strict and discipline her children to make sure they get their work done. As a mother, however, she is emotionally attached to her children and is supposed to be in tune with her children's emotional needs. Additionally, her

children don't really see their mother in the traditional teacher role and as such do not interact with her as if she was one ("Would you talk to your teacher that way?") This presents Rebecca with a challenge that is hard to reconcile without sacrificing parts of one of the roles in one way or another – risking (1) her children not getting their work done, or (2) her children being upset with her for being too academically demanding. This traps Rebecca, along with other mothers in our sample, in an impossible double-bind.

An additional emotional challenge that came up in some of our interviews was that some of the mothers were feeling personally responsible for their children's academic performance. Jennifer, the aforementioned high school English teacher, spoke about how the high expectations from her child's school were taking a toll on her mental health:

> So, you know, *whenever we're feeling stressed out*, you know I did email my daughter's teacher a few times, and she knows me, outside of school, you know, because I'm involved and stuff and *I thought I was having a mental breakdown. I was thinking "I cannot do this, this is too much."* And she was like well, you could try to skip this or skip this, but I really can't because you're giving a grade and my kid's not gonna fail. *I'm not gonna have her fail because we didn't do it, you know? So that's been tough*.

Jennifer's response is telling in many ways. Her use of first-person plural pronouns ("whenever *we're* feeling stressed out") suggests that Jennifer internalizes her child's anxiety and stress about school to the point where there is no distinction between what she and what her child feels. Jennifer feels stressed about the amount of work her child is expected to do and, since she is the one in charge of at-home learning, the amount of work that *she* is expected to do with her child (she earlier called the workload "unreasonable"). She describes having a breakdown, feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work, and reaching out to her child's teacher for assistance.

However, despite the teacher telling Jennifer that she could cut down on certain tasks and only turn in other work, Jennifer refused to do so in fear of it affecting her child's grade to the point of failing. This highlights the extent to which Jennifer found herself confined to intensive mothering ideals (Damaske 2013; Hays 1996). She was willing to compromise her mental health and well-being to prioritize her child's academic success above all else.

How Mothers Cope

It is clear that trying to balance at-home learning responsibilities with one's paid work brings about numerous challenges, both in the logistical and in the emotional sense. At the point of the interviews, schools in the area had been closed for 2.5-3 months, and whether schools would be re-opening schools in the fall for in-person instruction remained unclear How then have working mothers been dealing with the challenges and with the uncertainty that comes with not knowing how long this situation will continue to affect them?

Some of the strategies the mothers discussed were direct ways of trying to deal with role overload. Some, like Mary, tried to extend their workdays to try to fit in additional responsibilities. Mary, a college professor, said: "when I wasn't teaching during the day I was with the kids. Usually I do work in the evenings, yeah, I got a lot of work done in the evenings." While Mary and her husband were sharing the responsibilities of at-home learning, it was still a lot to juggle. Mary described spending most of the day with her children and then completing her work once her children were in bed. In her study of homeschooling mothers, Lois (2006) found that mothers who were trying to balance all of their roles at once by cutting down on sleep through waking up early or staying up late to do chores, quickly experienced burnout.

An alternative was accepting that you simply can't juggle everything at once. Several mothers we interviewed seemed to share that mindset. Sarah, a college administrator working from home, accepted that her house wasn't going to be pristine, because having everyone at home all the time made it very difficult to clean. Another respondent, Heather, talked about adjusting her parenting expectations and allowing her child more screen time than she usually would: "some days it's just like "Yeah, whatever, go ahead." You know? What else are we gonna do?" Both Sarah and Heather adjusted their expectations for what they could realistically get done. For Sarah, this meant not worrying about keeping the house clean. For Heather, it meant relying on technology to keep her child busy so that she could get other things done. Lois (2006) found that this sort of acceptance and reassessment of priorities was one of the key steps in reducing burnout and achieving role harmony in homeschooling mothers.

Another strategy employed by several of the mothers in our sample was emotion work, which came in many different forms. Some mothers were trying to make an issue seem lighter by laughing it off. For example, Megan was describing how hard it was for her to deal with the lack of boundaries between different spheres of life:

> *The lack of separation has been weirder and harder than I would have thought.* Like when you
>
> think "oh, I'm gonna be working from home," but then when you're like kids and spouse are here,
>
> *there is no boundaries [laughs]*

Megan is describing something that she found to be one of the biggest challenges of the pandemic for her, yet she ends with laughter. As such, Megan is trying to diminish her stress and frustration by using laughter to evoke a more positive feeling. Effectively, she is able to present the challenge she is facing as not worth the stress. Another respondent, Rebecca, achieves a similar outcome using a different method. When talking about the challenges of teaching her

children at home, she uses phrases like "I think everyone is struggling" and "but it's just how things are." In doing so, she broadens her perspective, allowing herself to focus on the fact that she is not alone in her struggles, but rather that these are challenges that many parents have to deal with during the pandemic. Through these strategies, Megan and Rebecca effectively suppress their emotions, either by trying to evoke positive ones through laughter, or by broadening their perspectives and focusing on the struggles of others.

A specific subtype of emotion work is what Lois (2010) termed temporal emotion management. This strategy entails trying to change one's emotions by manipulating one's subjective perception of time. This strategy was apparent in Jennifer's account when she was describing all of the tasks that went into making sure that her daughter could continue her dance class remotely:

> *We are that very involved parent*, which I don't want to come across as like a hovering parent because I don't think that's it at all, we love watching them participate in their sports and activities. You know, my daughter just had to do a virtual dance recital so they had to be in-costume, we had to clear out a space in the house, we had the video going so I had to video it and I'll be submitting the video to a drop-box and then the dance studio is making a DVD. […]. So, all that stuff I'm pretty on top of. *I mean in the long run they'll look back and say, "my parents were always there," at least I hope that's the case.*

In this example, Jennifer imagines what her children will think of her parenting "in the long run." She focuses on this imagined future moment in which her children will look back on the present and appreciate all the hard work Jennifer is putting into their daily lives. By focusing on this rewarding future moment, Jennifer is able to justify her hard work and effectively keep her mind off the struggles of the present.

Surprisingly, none of the mothers mentioned talking to their husbands about their challenges or asking them to take on more responsibilities. From their accounts, it seemed that the division of at-home learning responsibilities had stayed relatively the same throughout the 2.5-3 months since schools had closed. Some mothers spoke openly about lacking support from or feeling unappreciated by their partners. Megan, when asked about people she turns to when facing a challenge with parenting, wrote in her survey response: "I don't really have anyone to turn to. Sometimes topics will come up in work conversations and other parents will commiserate. Sometimes I read articles online that are supportive." Another respondent, Melissa, talked about how she felt her husband didn't really recognize and appreciate all the work she was doing around at-home learning and carework:

> *It is also frustrating because those are less tangible things to measure* as far as output goes, so at the end of the day, when somebody has had meetings or full-time work all day, versus somebody who is doing more of the people skills and organizing and soft skills, it's sometimes hard to identify either way with that.

Melissa describes feeling that her husband's paid work is more appreciated and perceived as more important than all of the unpaid work she does around the house and her children on a daily basis. Her narrative speaks both to a perceived lack of support and validation from her husband and to a broader devaluation of carework (Bullock and Morales Waugh 2004).

The lack of either practical or emotional support from partners is apparent in the narratives of many of the mothers who were primarily responsible for at-home learning in their households. It is especially disappointing, as Lois (2006) identified social support from a partner as a key element of reducing burnout in homeschooling mothers. Families where the husbands showed their support by being engaged in homeschooling or picking up more responsibilities

around the house were families in which the burnout stage often never happened (Lois 2006). Lack of similar support in many of the families we interviewed paints quite pessimistic predictions for the emotional well-being of the mothers if remote learning and work were to continue during the fall semester.

DISCUSSION

When we consider the temporal and emotional challenges that stem from trying to balance at-home learning responsibilities with paid work, it becomes quite clear that the stress of it is not something that a mother would voluntarily 'choose' for herself because she enjoys it or it fits her personality. Rather, what some participants have framed as personal preferences are in fact rooted in social structures that are far beyond the individual's control. Carework and education work have been traditionally perceived as feminine and thus fall disproportionately on women, something that is not really questioned (hence maybe why many participants didn't feel the need to explain these divisions.) (Gerstel 2000; Lois 2006; Lois 2010). These gendered stereotypes around carework and education affect not only broad divisions of labor in the family, but also everyday parent-child interactions, as found by Coltrane and Adams (2001).

Moreover, there is a robust body of literature documenting the ways in which carework (both paid and unpaid) is societally devalued and its challenges understated (Bullock and Morales Waugh 2004). Emotion work, a particularly challenging and draining form of carework is similarly undervalued and invisible, perhaps also due to its highly gendered status (Erickson 2005). We saw that one of the respondents, Melissa, spoke outwardly about feeling like the work she did at home was not valued or appreciated as much as her husband's paid work, both by her

husband and by children. While she was the only respondent who spoke about this so openly, the devaluation of carework was very apparent across these women's experiences, if only in the fact that they were expected to take on the bulk, if not all of it, on top of paid employment, with very little help from their husbands. Since carework is perceived as not as taxing, demanding, or even not as important as other forms of work, it might not even be perceived as an additional burden to take onto oneself.

Additionally, the respondents' challenges were exacerbated by the unbelievably high standards of modern mothering. This ties into Damaske's (2013) argument about women's work/family choices as moral dilemmas. Both employed and non-employed mothers value motherhood highly and are subjected to the intensive motherhood ideal, which "demands as a "gendered must" that "mothers... be all-giving to their children" (438). Because of these ideals, mothers might experience guilt when navigating work-family balance, leading them to devote themselves to intensive mothering even more strongly, through devoting more time and more emotion work to their children, at the expense of their own time and their emotions. Women who stay in the workforce, even those whose schedules are more demanding than their husbands still feel a pull towards intensive mothering ideals, feeling that they have to prove they're a good mother 'despite' the fact that they work for pay (having to prove that they didn't go the 'selfish' route of prioritizing their work over their children.) They might engage in at-home learning aid more intensively to fit those ideals and to 'compensate' for the time they need to spend away from their children for purposes of paid work.

It's important to acknowledge that while intensive mothering proved to be quite taxing for the women in our sample, their ability to engage in it is reflective of a certain amount of class

privilege. The mothers in our sample (almost exclusively white and middle-class) possess numerous resources and capital that makes it possible for them to devote time, energy, and money to their children. For example, middle-class mothers likely found it easier to reach out to the teachers with questions than would working mothers, since they are generally more likely to be engaged in their children's school activities and as such are more familiar with the structures in place (Haley-Lock and Posey Maddox 2016). It is important to keep in mind that intensive mothering is not only obviously gendered, but it remains shaped by both racial and class realities.

Finally, it is surprising that only one of the mothers in our sample, Heather, employed a more supervisory role, falling into Christopher's (2012) framework of extensive mothering. Perhaps one reason for this are the differences between Christopher's sample and our sample. While our sample was predominantly white, middle-class, and married, Christopher interviewed both married and single mothers across racial and class boundaries. Both Black mothers and single mothers were significantly more likely to subscribe to extensive mothering – both of which are groups that are not represented in our sample (with the exception of one single mother who was not included in this sub-sample.) Another reason might be the geographical characteristics of our sample. The majority of our respondents lived in Harrisburg, a predominantly white, middle- and upper-middle class school district, often described by the respondents as a "tight-knit community." Perhaps the elements of the local culture and social fabric of the school district encouraged certain types of parenting and school engagement over others. Interestingly, the one respondent who subscribed to extensive mothering, reported having moved to Harrisburg only nine months before the interview, and described being "still new to the

community." Perhaps having moved only recently, the family has not yet internalized the local "standards" of parenting. These are only some possible reasons and more research would be helpful to determine what factors might make certain working mothers more likely to engage in intensive mothering and others to engage in extensive mothering, or other strategies.

It is remarkable, albeit not very surprising, that social constructs such as gender remain powerful and unchallenged even during a global crisis, when we're forced to redefine the ways in which we think about virtually every aspect of our social worlds. The mothers in our sample reported little to no support from their partners in navigating at-home learning on top of their paid employment. Within those constraints, they did what they could to keep up with the high expectations they were held to as mothers, while also fulfilling the employee, teacher, and homemaker roles. The emotional struggle apparent in their accounts highlighted the ways in which carework continues to be feminized and devalued, and our ideas and expectations around parenting remain highly gendered, positing gender as the primary means of stratification in the family. Future research might employ a longitudinal approach and investigate the long-term effects of these inequalities on the family, especially as the future of education during the pandemic remains highly uncertain.

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