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Shania Kuo '23
Hamilton College

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Internalized Paternal Exclusion From the Inside Out: How Has COVID Changed It?

Levitt Center Summer Research Project

Shania Kuo

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INTRODUCTION

Since the first of the COVID lockdowns in New York in mid-March 2020, the 2020 elections and creation and distribution of the first COVID vaccines have passed. More than a year in and schools and workplaces are transitioning from remote to hybrid or in-person again. Our study interviewed previous participants of this study and asked for their reflections on managing work and child care and how they are coping with lifting restrictions.

This paper examines how families normalize the absence of fathers in day-to-day activities during COVID-19. By focusing on how mothers internalize their gender role and justify their expectations for their spouses, I will analyze the mothers' perspectives of her husband's role in the family. I argue how mothers' perspectives reveal the internalization of their gender roles, excluding fathers from daily family interactions and schedules and normalizing their husbands' absences and mothers' departures from the workforce. Since mothers are primarily interacting with their children and taking charge of their academics, this would also provide more evidence for the reproduction of gendered roles in the family. The children in our study are primarily interacting with their mothers during this time and thus associating motherhood with care work and fatherhood with breadwinning. Prior literature also points to many ways in which gender inequality persists, such as in careers in academia and sleep schedules (Minello, Martucci, and Manzo 2021; Auðardóttir and Rúdólfsdóttir 2021), but emerging research during the global pandemic shows how this inequality is deepening even as

workplaces switch away from remote work and back to in-person workplaces. To examine this topic, I investigate the following two research questions:

RQ1: How are mothers dealing with their husbands' absences when performing childcare and domestic work?

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RQ2: How have participants interpreted the impact on their careers and families resulting from COVID?

LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID and Gender Inequality

Gender inequality in non-COVID times has been well-documented, but the effects of how COVID will change this is still an emerging area of research for sociologists. In Landivar et al.'s study, "Early Signs Indicate That COVID-19 Is Exacerbating Gender Inequality in the Labor Force," the authors discuss how COVID-19 was beginning to disrupt the little egalitarian process made in the workplace. This article was released during the early stages of the global pandemic, and so research has since expanded on the idea of the growing inequality brought on by the pandemic.

One example of an expansion includes a study by Collins et al. (2021b). In this study, Collins et al. examined the consequences for mothers when they are primarily tasked with taking care of their children when they are without a solid safety net to assist them. This is also looking particularly at the patchwork reopening of schools across the country. What the researchers found was that school closures placed a major constraint on families to cover additional child care since schools also provide care infrastructure for young children while parents work

(Collins et al. 2021b:183). Due to the lack of an inexpensive public child care system, women often reduce hours, hurting career opportunities, and this did not change during the pandemic. The researchers found that even when both parents could telecommute, mothers still reduced their work time and had a greater likelihood of leaving the workforce (Collins et al. 2021b:183-184).

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The impact of this on the gender gap was expanded on in later research by the same researchers (Collins et al. 2021a). They found that mothers with young children have reduced their work hours by about 4 or 5 hours in order to keep up with the increased caregiving responsibilities the COVID-19 pandemic created like remote learning. While this reduction is slightly less in mothers with older children, fathers, in comparison, experienced little change in weekly work hours (Collins et al. 2021a:105-107). As a result, the researchers found that the gender gap grew an additional 5 percentage points in states where school was mostly offered online and labor participation dropped less in in-person or hybrid states (Collins et al. 2021a:187-188). Furthermore, research by Hazarika and Das (2020) found that fathers were unabashed in confessing that they spent more time focusing on work at home and that they and their wives prioritized the father's jobs over having them help with care work (Hazarika and Das 2020:435). This is consistent with previous research done by Offer and Schneider (2011) who found that fathers had less multitasking between housework and child care, leading to better wellbeing than mothers who had lower well-being scores (Offer and Schneider 2011:824). Connected to both of these results is the research done by Sayer (2005) who found that societal values and norms on how time should be allocated contribute to the decreased amount of free time available to mothers (Sayer 2005:297).

Global Trends

The high expectations placed on mothers is not limited to the United States although the U.S. faces the most visible and drastic effects. Collins (2019) conducted research across four western countries (Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the United States). She found the least amount of work-family conflict in Sweden followed by Germany, Italy, and the United States (Collins 2019:857). Mothers' understandings of work-family conflict arise based on the context of the

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support they receive and the country's hegemonic discourses and, as such, mothers in the U.S. ended up blaming themselves for the large amounts of work-family conflict they faced (Collins 2019:869). The internalization of the U.S. mothers presents the results of the U.S.'s lack of safety nets and workplace policies and stands in stark contrast to their European counterparts who did not blame themselves for work-family conflict. That being said, the existence of such work-family conflict still persists surrounding the idea of social expectations of mothers being home to care for children and take care of household chores. The question now is how has this changed? Collins notably published her study before the advent of COVID. Two areas of examination are Italy and Korea.

Early on in the pandemic, Italy faced the brunt of the virus and lockdowns. Since then, Italian sociologists have taken an active role in examining the effects of the pandemic for mothers and families. Mazzucchelli, Bosoni, and Medina (2020) found that young mothers faced the brunt of work and care responsibilities as schools closed down ((Mazzucchelli, Bosoni, and Medina 2020:706). Minello, Martucci, and Manzo (2021) reached out to academics in Italy and the U.S. and found that mothers often had to sacrifice their research for teaching and care work (Minello, Martucci, and Manzo 2021:587) and were fearful for their careers as they perceived that men and childless female academics were more productive during the lockdown than they were (Minello,

Martucci, and Manzo 2021:592). A study by Cannito and Scavarda (2020) found that mothers had to sacrifice investment in their careers by putting work off for later in the day or for the weekends so they can care for their children, an option not available to men who face rigid workplace policies (Cannito and Scavarda 2020:808-809). Finally, a study by Lagomarsino et al. (2020) found that even with the presence of the father, mothers are still more likely to

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reduce their hours and dedicate resources to teaching their children (Lagomarsino et al. 2020:859).

In contrast to Italy, Korea had almost no telecommuting options available prior to the pandemic. Research by Lee, Chin, and Sung (2020) found that many family members lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic with a 25% increase in applications for government unemployment benefits and a drastic increase in this rate for women (Lee, Chin, and Sung 2020:303). Despite the rapid increase in workplace flexibility, childcare facilities closed and, in a cultural context where long days outside the home are normal, families were forced to stay close together (Lee, Chin, and Sung 2020:305). In addition, access to help in-person was largely unavailable and inequality and discrimination rose, including for women who are more likely to be overworked or leave the workforce (Lee, Chin, and Sung 2020:305-308). The results from this study paint a grim yet familiar picture for Korean families as mothers in the United States face similar challenges.

These similarities and differences across nations are important to understand how the internalization of gender roles are not limited to the United States. Since they are not limited to only those in the United States, this also brings to light how deep the gender roles of women run and paint a clearer picture of how women in the study have adapted to this. **The Old and New Routine**

Life both prior and post COVID place the brunt of child caring burden on mothers, but in ways not always so visible. Prior to COVID, research by Shows and Gerstel (2009) found that fathers in professional positions were more likely to reproduce traditional gender norms because of the continuation of “inequality regimes” in their organizations (Shows and Gerstel 2009:180-181). Similarly, research by Craig (2006) found mothers were more likely to perform

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more interactive care than fathers, allowing fathers to enjoy more time talking and playing with their children than mothers (Craig 2006:274). What both of these studies point to is the fact that although fathers focus more on their careers than mothers who have to do more care work, fathers get to experience more enjoyable time with their children than mothers. Thus, fathers do not feel the need to involve themselves further in the family household since mothers are primarily taking care of the work.

So how does this hold up in a COVID-wrought society? School closures, a primary source of childcare for parents, are fraught with inequality as it is, but mothers are still the ones to bear the brunt of the impact. At-home learning has become a major part of childrens’ and mothers’ lives. Research by Bhamani et al. (2020) points out how parents at the beginning of the pandemic were attempting to grapple with the technology, but as our study will point out, it is mostly mothers attempting to do so. At the same time, previous research by Milkie, Nomaguchi, and Denny (2015) found that for children ages 3 to 11, maternal time spent with children did not matter for educational achievement (Milkie, Nomaguchi, and Denny 2015:367-368), calling into question the intensive mothering put forward by Hays (1998). Many of the mothers in our study participate in some form of intensive mothering, especially in terms of academics.

In fact, Collins et al. (2021b) found that even though telecommuting increased the visibility of

care work by mothers since fathers worked remotely, this did not result in fathers increasing their participation in caregiving (Collins et al. 2021b:110). When mothers fail to succeed in maintaining all the demands expected of them, they tend to feel a great amount of guilt (Auðardóttir and Rúdólfsdóttir 2021:175) as opposed to fathers who are often clueless when dealing with domestic work and care work (Auðardóttir and Rúdólfsdóttir 2021:176-177).

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My paper is an attempt to understand how, despite the fathers being home and doing little in the way of housework and care work, mothers are still tasked with holding up the household without much blatant ire. The internalization of gender roles to justify the “clueless father” has been made far more visible by the pandemic but the voices of mothers have largely been left in the background. My research seeks to fill in this gap.

METHODS

This IRB-approved study follows-up on research conducted from Summer 2020 to Winter 2021. In the prior studies, 52 participants were interviewed by research assistants via Zoom or phone. Participants all come from one central New York county, including rural, small town, and city districts with varying socioeconomic characteristics. This study focuses on parents with children in grades 3, 4, or 5.

In this study, we sent four rounds of surveys to four different groups of participants from the previous studies. The survey was created using Qualtrics, and survey questions included those such as income, changes in employment and/or living situation, and satisfaction with schooling. Participants also indicated if they agreed to an interview and if so, through what medium (phone, Zoom, FaceTime, or other). Only the data of those who agreed to an interview will be included in this study. Of 52 prior participants, 18 responded for a follow-up. Of these 18 participants, 17

were female and 1 was male, 17 were white and 1 was black, 17 were married and 1 was divorced, and 10 were less advantaged and 8 were more advantaged. For this study, less advantaged households were identified as having parents holding less than a college degree or working in blue/pink collar occupations. More advantaged households were one parent holding a

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college degree and professional career. Respondents were between the ages of 35 and 52 with a mean of 43.5.

Following the survey, one research assistant inputted survey responses into a Google spreadsheet. From there, research assistants reached out to participants via their preferred method of contact to schedule an interview. Research assistants sent a consent form via email, which participants had to sign prior to the interview. Interview questions consisted of questions on schooling, employment, family and friend networks, and, for Summer 2020 participants, questions regarding racial politics. Following the study, participants received a \$50 Visa gift card as a thank you gift for their participation in the study via email or mail depending on their preference.

After interviewing participants, research assistants transcribed several transcripts while the rest of them were sent to the transcription service Rev.com. While awaiting the transcripts, research assistants developed the existing codebook created by past assistants and then implemented them into the coding software Dedoose. Of the codes we used, the codes for Parental Involvement, Emotions Frustration, Emotions Resignation, Parent Advocate, Learning Difference, Evaluating Teachers, and Mother Academic Aid were primarily used in this study.

FINDINGS

Who is in charge of academics?

Examining mothers' expectations of fathers relies on understanding how households divide care work for their children as workplaces start to shift back into person. Table 1 displays information from the survey on who is involved in childcare as well as parental employment statuses.

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Table 1: Parents' involvement and employment status

Respondent's Name	Involved Figures	Mother's employment	Partner's Employment
Tami	Mother **	Employed part-time	Employed full-time
Barbara	Mother	Employed part-time	Employed full-time
Mary	Mother	Employed full-time	Employed full-time
Patricia	Balanced	Employed part-time	Employed full-time
James	Father	Employed full-time	Employed full-time
Heather	Mother	Employed full-time	Employed full-time
Melissa	Mother	No paid employment	Employed full-time
Jennifer	Mother	Employed full-time	No paid employment
Janine	Mother	Employed full-time	No paid employment
Lydia	Mother	Employed part-time	Employed full-time
Brenda	Balanced	No paid employment	Employed full-time
Stacey	Mother	Employed part-time	Employed full-time
Kelly	Balanced	Employed part-time	Employed full-time
Andrea	Balanced	Employed part-time	Employed full-time
Amy	Balanced	Employed part-time	Employed full-time

Thelma	Mother Employed part-time Employed full-time
Megan	Balanced Employed part-time Employed full-time
Marianne	Balanced Employed full-time Employed full-time

**These results are based on the self-reported surveys indicating who is involved with the children.*

***Tami left her employment blank in the survey, but noted part-time employment in her interview.*

Ten out of the eighteen households reported the mother being the primary involved figure, seven reporting balanced care work, and one reporting the father (the respondent being the father). In the cases of the ten involved mothers, they reported interactions with the school frequently and how their children were coping with the academic and/or social shifts. When reporting their husband's responsibilities, these mothers often referred to their involvement in children's extracurricular activities and/or how their work schedules' interfered. Despite this, many mothers discussed how involved and/or supporting their partners were, especially when it

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came to extracurricular activities or downtime. The general lack of irate by mothers (with few exceptions in this study) begs the question as to why they do not demand more for their husband. In a study by Sayer (2005), Sayer examines data from the 1990s to the 2000s examining how much free time is available to mothers and fathers as well as how the gender divide in time has changed. Sayer found that, compared to the 1990s, fathers now are spending more time in core care work activities such as cooking, cleaning and daily child care as a response to increase in demands for unpaid work in marriage (Sayer 2005:291). However, these differences do not offset the total amount of work women do in total work activities compared to men with just over a 30 minute drop in leisure time by 1988 (Sayer 2005:296). Now, two decades later and during a global pandemic, how are mothers' describing divisions of labor ?

Normalizing Unequal Gender Divisions

Family schedules have faced extreme alterations due to pandemic induced lockdowns. For mothers, this has meant helping children adapt to online learning and having them home all the time. Mothers, like Thelma and Brenda, left their jobs to watch over their children, while other mothers, like Heather, continued to work full-time in person or in other cases, as with Megan, began working remotely. However, many fathers continued to work full-time whether it was remotely or in-person. Eight mothers in this study justify these unequal divisions of labor as normal.

For example, Jennifer describes her family's busy schedule and why she cares for the children while her partner works full-time:

So he is working a lot and runs that business for his parents, and it's hard to find good employees. So there's times that he walks in the door at the end of the day, and he's turning around and going back to work. So I do most of the running because by the time he gets home, the running is almost over.

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Since Jennifer's partner is always working, he cannot be around during the day, and so the responsibility of dropping off and picking up her children naturally falls onto her since it would be too late for her husband to do so otherwise. When prompted on what she liked about this schedule, Jennifer moved to her children and how she enjoyed seeing her children socialize and involve themselves. Even though she was "eating dinner at 9:30 at night, [she was] still glad that they're able to be involved in all their stuff." Jennifer's emphasis on her children and her late dinners shifted to exclude her partner as part of her and her children's busy day-to-day schedule even if he did include himself in some of their activities. Jennifer is a full-time teacher, and teachers in particular have been struggling in adapting to the pandemic and remote learning. It is

important to note that while Jennifer's occupation as a teacher provides an unique set of challenges, the juggling between paid and unpaid work is present in other mothers in this study as well, with some mothers having to leave the workforce. However, despite even admitting to being stressed, Jennifer did not mention negotiating splitting oversight of children's on-line learning with her husband:

Well, for me, I'm a little bit of an OCD kind of person. And so I like things a certain way, so that is good, but at the same time, I basically worked all day in my building and taught and then I would come home and grade and answer emails and call parents. And I really didn't ever stop working, which was not conducive to my overall health, for lack of a better word, because now I'm super tired, stressed out, working 14, 16 hour days, plus helping my kids with their online learning.

Jennifer indicates a large degree of multi-tasking in her daily life as a teacher and mother, and is consistent with the 2000 National Survey of Parents, where 67% of married mothers and 42% of married fathers responded that they multitask frequently (Offer and Schneider 2011:813). She demonstrates the idea presented by Hoshchild (1989) of mothers who work a second unpaid shift in caring for their children and teaching them after their paid job, thus stalling the gender

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revolution. Blair-Loy et al. (2015) expands on this, noting that women's entry into traditionally male positions sharply falls after they become mothers. This is a *new* kind of stall for the gender revolution because women are lacking in opportunities in the workforce since they are responsible for unpaid work (Blair-Loy et al. 2015:438-439). In the additional layer of being a high school teacher, Jennifer is dealing with children besides just her own and adding to the emotional labor she has to provide. In all the families we studied, the father's absence in providing care work is a common trend. In thirteen of the eighteen families, the fathers are absent from most daily operations, four are absent from only academics, and only one is

primarily involved with his children.

This absence is largely accepted (although in some cases begrudgingly so), and is often normalized by mothers. Stacy provides an example where her husband returning to work was a relief:

Yeah, I'm not working. He's working full-time right now, but he wasn't working before, he was out of state before. He's working full-time right now. It was hard because no one's working before. [...] Everything's good, everything feels great, and I'm happy, and it's like, everything's on a schedule. I've actually planted my garden this year. That's good, because I didn't even get to do it last year. Things are getting more back to normal, so it feels good.

Stacey, who is employed part-time, presents her idea of normal is having everyone on a schedule and her partner is working full-time. Despite stating that her schedule offers her more time to relax as her children grow more independent and online school is still in effect, Stacey is still in charge of looking after her children when it comes to academics. In looking at the literature, we can turn to Pamela Stone's (2007) research to understand why women are often the ones to "opt out" of the workforce. In reality, the idea of opting out is a myth of choice for women as the demands of mothering and professional elites increase (Stone 2007:14). Stacey's "flexible schedule" is in fact working part-time and the idea of "family friendly" workplaces rides heavily

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on women working part-time with mothers facing significant career penalties while fathers face penalties if they leave the workforce (Stone 2007:16). Families would face significant financial pressure from workplaces if fathers decided to leave, thus leading families to decide on mothers taking leave. While Stacey still has her job, many women in Stone's study eventually decided to leave the workforce as Stone found that part-time schedules would eventually have the same amount of work as full-time schedules. This work adds on top of the concerted cultivation mothers had internal and external expectations of, thus leaving fathers as the ideal parent to keep

working as they did not have the same expectations in caring for the children (Stone 2007:15-16).

Tami's household has a situation mirroring Stacey's in terms of the academic portion where she worked part-time while her husband worked full-time. In her case, Tami was pleased with her kids' school pre-COVID, but she grew discontent with the lack of work assigned to the children while they were virtual, feeling her children were not properly prepared or caught up. However, in framing her concerns about the academics, Tami starts off with using "we" to represent her and her husband; " We were 100% happy. We loved the school, we loved the teachers, we loved the administration." As the interview continued and we learned more about the children's academics, Tami used "we" to refer to her children and her and transitioned to using "I" for opinions; "But by the time October hit, the data was there. It wasn't spreading in schools. And I think we needed to go full time. And so I'm, I'm disappointed that we missed out on all of the months we were virtual from the end of October I think, all the way through 'til um February." Tami did not divulge how she and her husband split domestic and care work if they did, but her nuance of switching the inclusive "we" to "I" about her children's academics indicates Tami may have more investment. When discussing her husband, Tami places emphasis

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that he, like her, heavily involved himself in the children's extracurricular activities. Tami and other mothers in this study show traces of hinting towards Sharon Hays' idea of intensive mothering, which is the idea that mothers must put their children above all else and lavish their children with resources and attention (Hays 1996:8). While most participants never explicitly state this, Hays reports how mothers are likely to say they share work with their husbands equally despite husbands never working the same amount of unpaid work as their wives. This is a result of mothers believing fathers are dangerous and incompetent when dealing with children

or not as “on top of it” as mothers are (Hays 1996:101-102). This idea of “dangerous and incompetent” rides off of one idea of hegemonic masculinity in which certain stereotypical ideals of masculinity and aggression become the cultural ideal for men (Donaldson 1993:644-645). This hegemonic ideal paints men as the protector but not the nurturer, pushing the stereotype that fathers are incapable of nurturing and instead have to focus on a societal ideal of what being a man is: aggressive and dominating.

That being said, financial security certainly plays a factor in the internalization of gender roles and why fathers are consistently absent. In her interview, Brenda presents her perspective on her and her husband’s employment status. Brenda explains in her interview how her husband’s schedule did not drastically change unlike her who had to resign from her job to which she noted displeasure.

So basically he was employed the entire time, my husband. And um, so nothing changed for him at all. And I'm not gonna lie, like I was resentful of that. It seems like everything stays the same for him. And, you know, I, I'm always the one that has to give up, you know, my job or whatever it is. That's just how it works. He makes more money than me, and he'd been at this job way longer, so you know, it's me that has to make the sacrifice and I understand it and he understands it, but at the same time, we are a little bit resentful, and it's not fun, but, so his life has stayed the same.

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Brenda’s usage of “That’s just how it works” paints a clearer picture of the internalization of her gender roles. Even though Brenda is resentful that she must leave her work, there is also a resigned understanding that to provide care for her children without facing severe financial disruption, giving up her job is the most sensible option to keep life as it has always been. Negotiation does not take place because the idea of her leaving the workplace is a more appealing option for financial stability, which is consistent with existing literature (Stone 2007; Collins 2019). There is an irony in what Brenda says here as she says her decision was a choice

based on financial stability but women who become mothers face a large wage gap compared to men. Collins finds that for many middle-class American women, the idea of having workplace policies supporting fatherhood is not in the forefront of their minds, with many women feeling it is their responsibility to handle their problems without intervention or aid (2019: 867). This idea is rooted in the United States' value of individualism, which runs in contrast to the collectivist mentality in Sweden where childcare is seen as a duty of society rather than the sole responsibility of mothers and family (Collins 2019: 869). In the quote below, Brenda points out the unavailability of her husband despite being home and the stress of his increased work hours.

His schedule is the same, although he did get, um, more responsibility, like they added a second shift that works. [...] So they added a second shift. So then he became responsible for not only the first, but the second shift because he's the boss there. And so, um, so he had to be like available, even when he wasn't physically in the building, he had to be available like through email and by phone and stuff, so that was a little bit like stressful because in the time that he was home, he wasn't always like able to be present and help with things. And so they had to be available to work too.

In this bit, Brenda is presenting the idea that even though her husband was home, he was not necessarily “present” in terms of being able to help her. However, Brenda later pointed out that once schools reopened, her husband's second shift ended and the situation in their home calmed down again. It is important to note that the situation at home calming down only applies to

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Brenda once her husband's second shift at work ended. Work is consistently seen as a higher priority for fathers than mothers, not just Brenda's husband. During the time of COVID, this applies even as fathers are present in the house. This begs the question of why. Where is the father's place in a house whose structural and cultural forces have led to the normalization of their absence?

Normalizing Fathers' Absence

Barbara's household also presents an example of an expectation for fathers to be absent even if their presence has a positive effect. At the time of the interview, Barbara was employed part-time and her husband worked from home for four days a week and went to the office once a week. While this offers Barbara more time in the week to go out if she needs to, Barbara also pointed out that her children are no longer very little; "it's no big deal and they're old enough to where he's not changing diapers or anything, so yeah." The task of changing diapers has associations with babies and the fourth shift highlighted in Auðardóttir and Rúdólfsdóttir's study (2021), emphasizing the connection between motherhood and childcare tasks and the absence of paternal presence from such activities. Furthermore, Barbara reinforces the idea of maternal expectations of fatherhood being outside childcare by highlighting his "hands on" activities.

He is. He's a very good dad. He's hands on. A lot of times he'll make... I'll plan out dinners and if it's something that he makes, then he'll make it. I do a lot of the baking in the house. He does more of the cooking. He's coached soccer before. We try and go swimming as a family once a week because they opened back up so now we go swimming.

Barbara points out here that her husband does more cooking than her unless he cannot cook something, and she still puts herself as the one who does the planning. While her husband is available in some aspects of the home, Barbara's husband is primarily involved with the public

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aspect of fathering. Barbara shows this by mentioning his household contribution and then shifting to his activities outside of the house. In examining the phrase "hands on," mothers are hands on by focusing on household activities and childcare while fathers are hands on when

doing a little of this same work but focusing more on outside activities to do with the children. While the domestic work is unbalanced, Barbara still calls him a “good dad.” The idea of a “good dad” has different expectations from a “good mom.” In Show’s (2009) study, fathers being present was more meaningful even if that meant dividing their attention between their family and work (Show 2009:170). This runs in contrast to mothers who feel they have to be there because of the intensive mothering ideal. Also, Hays’ (1996) book outlines how mothers “know” fathers are less attentive to children than mothers are. Fathers are unaware that raising children requires a great deal of knowledge and work and that acquiring this knowledge and engaging in this work can be the responsibility of both parents (Hays 1993:103). Mothers in Hays’ study report a great deal of frustration in asking their husband to care for their children, and mothers feel an immense amount of guilt that she suggests fathers would never experience when it comes to spending time with their children (Hays 1996:103-104). Barbara also reinforces the concept of mothers providing emotional support while fathers do not as much. When asked about who explains emotional concepts to her youngest daughter (like friends not responding to or picking up phone calls right away), Barbara made a distinction between herself and her husband.

My older daughter is nine and she is a very logical person and my younger daughter is seven and she's more emotional, which actually matches up with how I am. So the things that bother her don't bother my older daughter and she's like, why would that bother you? But I understand that. And I can explain that. And my husband and my older daughter are very logical and it can be harder to explain feelings to them.

While Barbara includes her oldest daughter as someone more logical, the distinction in who explains emotional concepts is a gendered stereotype that mothers must explain those scenarios

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and that fathers cannot understand or explain those feelings. This reinforcement of masculinity

tied to fathering is demonstrating Connell's idea of men's pursuit of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005). Ishii-Kuntz's study expands on Connell's study, finding that Japanese fathers identify strongly with fathering roles despite not having fathers engaged in child care. How much time fathers spend with their children is dependent on how much time their fathers had spent with them (Ishii-Kuntz 2013:262-263). While Barbara's line of thinking is in line with Hays' discovery of mothers finding fathers to be dangerous and incompetent (Hays 1996:103), fathers are capable of being sensitive and nurture their children (Craig 2006:261). This perception is an indicator of another way mothers internalize their identity as mothers and settle themselves into gender norms of maternal and paternal roles and responsibilities. Parental interaction, as pointed out by Ishii-Kuntz, is a key element in this, but gender gaps in the workforce are shaping who is present in the children's lives, creating a reproduction of gender norms as children grow accustomed to generally seeing mothers as their primary caretakers.

Thelma, who is employed part-time, explains her husband is an ex-military member. However, while he was in the military, Thelma framed his schedule as him being mostly absent. Despite this, she also noted how, since the military had relatively strict rules, so did her household despite her husband's consistent absence: "So basically, it was just myself and my children. I felt like a part-time mom." Her choice of words here illustrates a view of motherhood as a job as opposed to a social role she has taken on. However, this "job" is one unpaid and split between her paid job. Her statements puts into context the influence fathers have on the household despite not being present. Thelma's husband has recently re-transitioned entirely back to work in-person, but Thelma noted that having her husband home this past year was not entirely positive:

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Part of that might be time management to be able to do that. We try to have a life balance,

whereas I'm available to take care of the children if my husband wants to do something that he needs to get done, or maybe if he wants to see a friend, or maybe if he has some tasks that he... something, and he does the same for myself. So we're always trying to make that life balance. With him being here more often, I suppose it's a little bit more difficult. Well, it's not more difficult. It's just that I don't have as much personal time, I would say, if that makes sense. But I mean, it's still better than... I like it better than the way that it was before. So I mean, you have your give and take. That's your trade-off.

Having her husband being mostly absent was a way to have time to herself, and his return has left her having to balance time with her children and him as well. Also notable is that Thelma did not return to full-time after her husband returned to work. She left her full-time job to help her children with online learning, but continues to stay part-time despite the children being back to in-person. Her husband's presence and somewhat increased availability did not mean she would return to work again as her children's education became her priority. Thus, although Thelma stated she felt "like a part-time mom," in reality she is a full-time mom teaching her children and portraying the "choice" of leaving and taking on part-time work (Stone 2007).

Megan's household follows a similar pattern with Megan working part-time and her husband working full-time. Megan's husband is a financial advisor, requiring internet priority while he was working remotely. As a result, Megan and her children had to find workarounds to ensure he had the necessary resources. In fact, Megan noted she was tasked with keeping the balance in the house ("he had his job and then I had the rest") and that there was more tension in the house when he was working remotely. In fact, her husband's presence in the home was more of a source of conflict given the technological limits Megan's household faced, noting one time her husband became frustrated to the point of "charging" out of his office and demanding everyone to get off the internet. This tension relaxed once her husband returned to the office for work. When it came to her children, Megan had very strong internalization of failure since her children struggled with remote learning.

Despite everyone saying, "Everyone's going through this, it's not just you," getting their grades at the end of the year was like, what happened? I really dropped the ball, I should have had a better plan or something. I thought I would be better at it, I thought I would be more resilient, but it just felt so overwhelming just trying to manage all of that.

Megan's internalization is one much like her responsibilities: all on her. Despite her husband being physically present in the house, his primary responsibilities lie with work, and that is something Megan also prioritizes for him. She does not expect him to work with the children on their academics, noting how her husband's work is a professional role he "takes very seriously". This is an idea once again reflecting Ishii-Kuntz's research on Japanese fathers in which older-generation fathers did not participate as actively with their children because they placed more emphasis on their jobs (Ishii-Kuntz 2013:267). When Megan "keeps the balance," she is keeping the balance in a skewed manner, trying to ensure her husband has what he needs for work. In the interview, she did not make note of any prior attempts to negotiate with her husband. However, Megan minimizes her experience and struggles, noting it was not as bad as others were going through. By doing this, Megan justifies her children's undesirable grades as her own fault. Again, this is an individual blame. She does not try to say it was both her own and her husband's fault.

Dividing the responsibilities in the household is an egalitarian idea, but this idea of egalitarianism is muddled by participants who have different interpretations of what it means. Lydia described in her interview that she believes her household divides housework in an egalitarian manner as she enjoys doing and splitting chores with her husband. However, Lydia is still the one primarily responsible for her children's education, sitting with her children while they were attending classes since her work is primarily via email. This does not mean Lydia is blind to the absence of her husband. In fact, Lydia is very much aware of the limited time her

husband spends with her and her children.

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Oh, we're definitely closer. My husband loves being at home [inaudible 00:20:50] time. I don't know. It's easier to look at it the time together as a gift. When do you get this? Especially I see our kids, they grow up so fast. So I hope they look back at this and think, well, we were so close and we got to cook so many meals together and watch a lot of movies, thank God Disney+ came out.

However, despite being aware of the absence of her husband, Lydia still uses this as a way to discuss how her husband is involved in ways outside of care work. This still pertains to Hays' presentation of the "gult gap" where fathers are able to do things without feeling the guilt mothers feel for leaving their children without their presence for extended periods of time (Hays 1996:104).

Much of my discussion thus far has focused on mothers unconsciously normalizing the absence of father, especially in academics, but this is a case of normalization of fathers in at least one area of the house. With hegemonic masculinity prevailing in households, normalization is bound to occur under the guise of logic. While Lydia still carries most of the workload, having someone to split the chores does prevent the overwhelming juggle that mothers like Megan and Jennifer have to do. In other words, we see variation in levels of involvement from dads. While Jennifer is employed full-time and Lydia is employed part-time, both of their husbands are employed full-time. Paternal presence in the house is fully normalized in Jennifer's household, but having her husband remote and actively participating in some aspect of domestic work has led to a feeling of closeness as expressed by Lydia. It is thus of interest to further examine how workplace policies interact with the household to see the impact of paternal absence normalization.

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DISCUSSION

Mothers do not “choose” to bear most of the domestic work but instead we see them pushed into fulfilling these tasks due to workplace shifts, school and daycare closures and cultural norms around gender and parenting. . Fathers are perceived as “naturally” busy with work and cannot spend as much time caring for the children or doing household chores. Since fathers generally hold the status as breadwinners, their abilities as breadwinners takes precedence while mothers pick up the work at home. Workplaces continue to hold this as an ideal as opposed to creating more workplace safety net policies, and, as such, fathers are unable to pick up more responsibility at home. As a result, mothers are the ones to have to bear the brunt of the multitasking balancing act, and many have left full-time work in order to do so. The consequences of COVID-19 cannot be fully assessed yet. However, as many researchers have pointed out like Collins et al. (2021a), the gender gap is slowly widening, and it is not infeasible to believe that it will only get wider from here given the results from my study and past ones.

Sociologists have taken an active approach to analyzing the effects of COVID-19 on the family. The results point to an overall trend of mothers sacrificing their careers in order to fill in for the family on caregiving and at-home learning needs. However, as previous literature has shown, their intensive mothering does not necessarily improve academics as previously believed, meaning that the ideal of having mothers at home to benefit the children’s studies and outcomes is not true (Milkie, Nomaguchi, and Denny 2015). It is a persisting ideal that is misplaced in reality and continues to force women out of the workplace, putting pressure on mothers to be a “good mother”. Many mothers in this study enjoyed their work from before they left their jobs if they had to do so, and many also felt it was the only logical decision to leave their jobs for caring for their children. Such assumptions reveal an internalization of gender roles excluding fathers

from the home. This internalization runs deeper than what mothers can feasibly grasp as the “guilt gap” persists between mothers and fathers.

CONCLUSION

This research is important in examining the future consequences for women because of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The gender gap has been slightly decreasing in the past few years, yet the global pandemic has led to major setbacks (Collins et al. 2021b). My research focuses on one aspect of this gender gap and the ensuing inequalities: internalization of these gender norms in mothers and their families..

Important to note is that we had one father in this study who largely remained undiscussed. The participant provides a counter scenario in which he reported his wife’s workplace was largely inflexible while the father had more flexibility. As a result, he took on a majority of the carework. While this reverse scenario would provide insight into how internalization is not absolute and can be reversed, only having one participant was a large limitation. We did not specify gender of respondents when recruiting, but of the 52 respondents, only one man responded. This is telling of itself in suggesting that only women are able to discuss the care of their children as opposed to fathers.

For future research, examining how children have also internalized gender roles would open to the idea of whether the global pandemic supported the gender divide. Since mothers were the ones primarily leaving their jobs to provide care, it can be theorized that this interaction is shaping children’s perception to some extent.

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