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The Balancing Act Is Magnified: U.S. Mothers' Struggles amidst a Pandemic

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Successes are often noticed in reflection after an event; struggles are felt in the moment. When COVID-19 was recognized as a public health emergency in the United States (U.S.), many mothers felt their struggles more acutely. Much of 2020 feels like a pressure cooker for mothers, where the steam valve does not fully relieve the mounting pressure they felt because of COVID-19. Most families are experiencing additional stress due to COVID-19, but in heterosexual couples, that work disproportionately falls to women, as they are spending, on average, fifteen hours more per week on education and household tasks (Cohen and Hsu). This additional work reflects the normative discourse of intensive motherhood, which society uses to judge mothers as good or bad. Coined by Sharon Hays, intensive motherhood is “*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive*” (8). Jean-Anne Sutherland notes that intensive motherhood requires mothers always give of themselves “physically, emotionally, psychologically and intellectually” (313). In this chapter, we argue the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the demands of intensive motherhood on mothers. From suddenly becoming at-home educators to the difficulties of managing a family in quarantine, mothers during the pandemic are experiencing added stressors, affecting every aspect of their lives.

In this chapter, we provide mothers' perceptions of their struggles during the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, which were collected via telephone interviews in May and early June 2020. All eighteen mothers live in the U.S., are over age eighteen, and are cisgender women married to men. The participants' reflections on their struggles before and during the pandemic

highlight how mothers experience the increased demands of intensive motherhood through the lens of COVID-19. We first discuss intensive motherhood and how participants relate it to their struggles. Then, we turn to the participants' answers and self-reflections. Lastly, we draw some implications about the effects of COVID-19 on intensive motherhood.

Intensive Motherhood

Intensive motherhood as a normative discourse requires mothers to spend time, energy, and money on their children as informed by expert advice. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels extended Hays's definition to include the media's role in perpetuating intensive motherhood discourse in an easily consumable format. Harmony Newman and Angela Henderson call it the "modern mystique"—a "seemingly ubiquitous ideology of motherhood as the ideal despite a general sense of dissatisfaction with it" (474). Intensive motherhood also narrows the category of who can be considered a good mother, typically married, white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied women (O'Brien Hallstein). Those who fall outside of this ideal cannot reach good mother status because they are deemed inappropriate by intensive motherhood, reinforcing the dominance of the discourse (O'Brien Hallstein). Yet there is an allure to good mother status, as the label offers security, self-worth, and belonging (Ennis).

Andrea O'Reilly explores "ideological assumptions" of what she terms "patriarchal motherhood" (14). Among these assumptions are idealization, which "sets unattainable expectations of and for mothers," and individualization, which requires "mothering to be the work and responsibility of one person" (14). Through individualization, mothering experiences are thought to be unique to the individual, not elements of a collective experience. So, although

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mothers certainly experience similarities in their **childraising** (e.g., a child taking their first steps or losing their first tooth), individualization causes mothers to feel alone in the experience. The feeling of being alone also falls under the assumption of privatization, which “locates motherwork solely in the reproductive realm of the home” (14). As a result, mothers are physically separated from others in similar situations.

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That mothers feel alone in their motherhood is not an accidental function of intensive motherhood. O'Reilly explains that normative motherhood discourses “are rewritten in response to, and as a result of, significant cultural and economic change” (44). She sees intensive motherhood as a response to the rise of neoliberalism, an ideology predicated upon individualism and the removal of government interference in both the market and in life more generally. A neoliberal normative motherhood discourse, thus, compels mothers to see their experience and responsibility as only their own. **As** Fiona Green posits, intensive motherhood “serves the interests of neo-liberal, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (199). In this way, intensive motherhood charges mothers as the primary caretakers of their children—an individualizing experience keeping mothers so focused on private concerns that they have no time or energy to spend in collective reimagining. These societal and simultaneously internalized pressures can further exacerbate the day-to-day issues mothers face by increasing the stress on them.

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Additionally, intensive motherhood establishes expectations that are almost impossible to meet, assuring mothers feel guilt and shame in their failure. However, O'Reilly believes **guilt** and shame are “neither accidental nor inconsequential” but are “deliberately manufactured and monitored” to psychologically regulate mothers (58). Sutherland underscores this mother guilt: “The notion of maternal guilt is so pervasive in our culture as to be considered a ‘natural’ component of motherhood” (310). Moreover, the demands of modern consumerism complicate

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mothers' experiences with their children, causing them not to question the standards to which they aspire but instead to perceive themselves as failures (Sutherland). In other words, mothers internalize intensive motherhood predicated upon neoliberalism to find themselves constantly failing; then, they assume it is a personal, individual issue rather than a problem with society at large.

In this project, we ask participants about their struggles both before and during the pandemic. Admittedly, we are asking mothers to focus on the ways they perceive themselves not living up to the so-called good mother expectations they have, which are informed by intensive motherhood. Yet in listening to their individual perceptions, we can better understand their lived experiences. Their answers demonstrate, subsequently, the increased demands intensive motherhood has placed on mothers as a result of the pandemic through such challenges as social distancing and quarantines.

Interviews and Participants

After obtaining approval from the institutional review board, we recruited participants from fellow members of private Facebook groups specifically aimed at mothers, allowing us easy access to eighteen mothers over the age of eighteen. We interviewed participants from around the U.S. via recorded phone calls, which lasted between twenty-two and fifty-four minutes. All participants were cisgender women married to men, and all had between one and four children. Although the children's ages ranged from seven weeks old to adults (in their thirties), most of the children were five years old or younger, meaning the struggles the mothers experienced might have been tied to the higher dependency of young children on parents for their everyday needs.

Notably, our snowball sampling allowed us to interview two grandmothers as well. Some of the participants were moms of multiples (i.e., twins), and some had children with various diagnoses, ranging from time spent in the NICU after birth to ADHD. Most of the participants were in their thirties or forties, and most were working mothers. A few participants were highly educated, holding at least a master’s degree. Most participants were white and at least middle class. With these demographics, the participants fulfill the ideal of intensive motherhood—that is, society likely sees them as good mothers, even though most of them challenge intensive motherhood by not being stay-at-home parents. Instead, most participants work both outside and inside the home, managing both a job and their household simultaneously. [All participant names reported are pseudonyms chosen by the women.](#)

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From the Mothers

In this section, we analyze the mothers’ words in their descriptions of their struggles, which while varying widely, still bear some common themes. For the purposes of analysis, we will separate the mothers’ perceived struggles pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 to feature how the struggles shifted due to the pandemic. As we discussed above, when mothers inevitably fall short of the intensive motherhood ideal, they feel guilty. It should come as no surprise that two of the most common words the women used to describe their struggles were “guilt” and “enough.” Mothers felt guilty when they did not live up to their own expectations, such as [Mandy](#), a white mother to a three-year-old son and three-month-old twin boys, who often felt guilty when she was short-tempered with her children. Similarly, mothers frequently asked themselves whether they were doing enough. Carol, a mother to three daughters, aged between

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three and eight, asked: “Am I balancing their meals enough? Am I giving them enough opportunities to do whatever? Am I spending enough time with them?” These common patterns are important to keep in mind as we turn to the struggles participants experienced as mothers.

Struggles Pre-COVID-19

Given that most participants were working mothers, the number one issue they struggled with before the pandemic was time. This included balancing life between work and home and being present with children when at home. As Leslie, a white lawyer and mother to an eight-year-old daughter and a four-year-old son, remarked, “It just seems like there’s never time to do everything well, and I feel guilty.” Leslie’s comment encapsulates what many working mothers said and felt. Another common struggle experienced by participants was discipline, whether how to adequately discipline children or how to strike a balance between being too strict and too permissive. Sparrow—a white, stay-at-home mom with a master’s degree and three daughters five and under (the youngest having been born during the pandemic, which in itself presents a unique set of parenting circumstances)—explained discipline can be frustrating and overwhelming when trying to figure out various styles without relapsing into the way her parents parented (e.g., spanking), which she does not necessarily want to emulate. Many mothers also struggled with yelling or displaying a lack of patience with their children, thereby increasing their feelings of guilt. For example, Kate, a white mother with a four-year-old son and a two-month-old son who also holds a PhD, said she struggles with yelling “too quickly.” Participants’ struggles before the pandemic centered on the balancing act these mothers engage to try to do everything well.↓

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Some mothers struggled with the isolation of not having friends or family nearby to help, which, again, can increase the chance of losing patience with children. This is best summarized by Tasha, a white military spouse with two children under four, who felt isolated because she did not have other adults to relate to around her. She said this isolation made it difficult for her to remember that other mothers were struggling as well; she felt alone in the experience as a military spouse unfamiliar with others in her community. Furthermore, she described that she was “just waiting for this period of life to be over,” but she also sadly acknowledged that it was not leaving anytime soon. Thus, most of the issues mothers in our study struggled with before COVID-19 revolved around a lack of balance—an imbalance between working and making time for children, an imbalance regarding the right amount or type of discipline, and/or an imbalance concerning the time spent with their children and the time spent away from them.

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Struggles during COVID-19

We conducted interviews in May and June 2020, amidst the chaos of quarantine, the end of an unusual school year, and with little hope on the horizon of when normalcy might return. As a result, asking mothers to explain their struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic was perhaps the easiest question for many of them to answer. As Tasha said, the pandemic “has just amplified the stressors and the struggles of motherhood and parenthood a lot.” Indeed, many participants identified something similar in their answers by explaining that they thought their struggles were like those of other parents in the pandemic. In contrast to the way that time was a struggle for many mothers prepandemic, it is a different burden during COVID-19. This is perhaps best explained by Gail, a white working mother of two sons under the age of nine, who observed that

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it feels bizarre to say there is not enough time when, if anything, there seems to be more time. In other words, now that families were isolating at home, they technically had more time together, yet the pressures of a full-time job did not dissipate, and the duties of managing a home increased due to the number of people occupying the same space consistently for greater time periods. Like Gail, many participants reiterated the feeling of not having enough time to accomplish everything, even though mothers were around their families for more of the day. Some mothers indicated that they were struggling with the reality that everyone being together all day meant they themselves had no alone time, increasing their own frustration with the situation. Mothers also struggled with creating or establishing structure during the pandemic, especially with keeping children occupied. Martina, a white part-time nurse and mother to a nine-year-old son and four-year-old twin boys, said she did not feel like she was “resourceful enough” to keep her children entertained at home, triggering guilt when they ultimately watched more television than she would have allowed pre-pandemic.

Another major struggle for mothers was remote education. For example, Gail said parents were now expected to work full-time as well as teach and parent full-time, which she declared an unsustainable endeavour. Patricia Cohen and Tiffany Hsu posit that in heterosexual married couples who work full-time, mothers “provide close to 70 percent of childcare during standard working hours”—a “burden” that was “supersized” in the face of quarantine. Intensive motherhood prescribes women pick up the slack of excess parenting in order to be good mothers free of guilt. During the pandemic, mothers obliged to stay home were pushed further into intensive motherhood; they had to do excess parenting without the additional support of other adults, such as teachers, grandparents, or childcare providers. Thus, the demands of intensive motherhood have amplified the struggles mothers have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Implications

The struggles mothers faced before the pandemic centred around balance, trying to juggle multiple responsibilities without dropping everything. Recognition of COVID-19 as a public health emergency in the U.S. only increased their number of responsibilities, as mothers now had fewer support systems upon which to rely—a decidedly neoliberal move that requires mothers do more work with fewer resources (O’Reilly). Like Kate noted, “I’m totally down with a village” of people to help raise children as “there are people that are just wired better for the patience and letting them [children] explore.” Yet in the pandemic, these support structures have been virtually nonexistent. Similarly, Suzanna, a white mother with two daughters under ten, prioritized a “stellar job performance” in order to avoid the possibility that she could be laid off. These mothers struggled to balance their multiple roles as mother, employee, educator, advocate, and partner. Some mothers, like GH, a white teacher and mother to a five-year-old daughter and a seven-month-old daughter, explained women just figure it out. A friend of GH’s told her she could be a “great teacher and a good mom or a great mom and a good teacher;” GH chose to be a great mom and is just figuring out how to best fulfill that role.

Much of this balancing act is because, as Solveig Brown argues, the U.S. has “relied on intensive mothering norms to bridge the gaps between cultural change and its effect on childrearing” (40) rather than putting in place policies that effectively support parents. The reliance on mothers has only increased during the pandemic, as mothers have become at-home educators, housekeepers, and/or personal assistants for their families in addition to whatever other responsibilities they may hold (e.g., their job or service or community activities, such as

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being a local board member). Even as participants referred to the fact that others were similarly struggling, the mothers still experienced the pandemic as **an** isolating experience, as they did not have access to support systems that they might have had prepandemic. The combination of isolation and increased demands on a mother's time escalated the pressures of intensive motherhood so that when mothers inevitably dropped one of the responsibilities they juggled, they felt guilt. Unfortunately, the pandemic is one more instance in which the U.S. will continue to rely on mothers shouldering the slack created by a society unprepared to adequately handle such a crisis.

Yet if normative motherhood discourses are affected by "significant cultural and economic change" (O'Reilly 44), then certainly COVID-19 marks a place of possibility for the normative discourse of intensive motherhood to be shifted. One participant, Anne, noted how mothers and parents need to cultivate themselves "as parents in communities." Anne explained that no one teaches mothers how to parent except their children, to some degree, so figuring out how to parent well should be a societal issue rather than an individual one. Instead of creating societal parameters of success or failure, as intensive motherhood does, Anne suggested we find ourselves communities of others who validate and support our way of parenting, not without challenging us to be better parents, but where we can stop worrying whether we are good enough as parents. Amidst an isolating pandemic, the Facebook groups from which we recruited participants may serve as that kind of community, allowing mothers to be honest about their struggles in a place where others listen and understand rather than judge. Other participants, too, echoed that support from likeminded people helped them manage the stressors of pandemic life.

Conclusion

In this study, we interviewed eighteen mothers who primarily fit the intensive motherhood ideal about their struggles both before COVID-19 and during the pandemic. Since most participants were working mothers, their major struggle was balancing home life and work life. Intensive motherhood claims that a good mother would not need to find balance; she would already be at home with the children. As a result, many participants struggled with guilt over some of the choices they made as mothers and wondered whether they were doing enough for their children.

The pandemic only amplified mothers' struggles. ~~The demands of intensive motherhood became more intense.~~ Again, mothers struggled to find balance. Although there was seemingly more time, mothers still felt ~~there was less time to do everything well.~~ Unfortunately, the excess parenting that the pandemic created, especially around remote learning and childcare, fell to mothers. COVID-19 has made parenting a harder experience in myriad ways, some of which we have not yet even discovered.

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