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Grace Ellen Brannon & Molly Wiant Cummins

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



'Never time to do anything well': mothers' reported constraints during a pandemic

Grace Ellen Brannon and Molly Wiant Cummins

Department of Communication, University of Texas Arlington, Arlington, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Mothers' perceptions of mothering could potentially influence several aspects of their home and work commitments. This study explores how mothers perceive their mothering experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic via 18 in-depth interviews. The authors use constraint theory and negotiation frameworks to discuss how family communication processes and perceptions of mothering are related within the context of the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Findings demonstrated how working from home increased perceptions of family tensions, especially with the lack of home/work separation. Throughout the narratives, participants describe specific constraints at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural levels, as well as how they were negotiated. This study extends past research centering mothers within the context of family communication, specifically through the rich experiences described by participants on work and home balance and provides directions for future research while discussing practical implications for family and gender issues researchers.

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Nearly nine in ten women will become mothers during their lifetimes (Livingston, 2018). The transition into parenthood is represented by increased uncertainty alongside changes to the parental couple's relationship (Belsky et al., 1983; Knobloch, 2008). While fathers do experience 'profound emotional disturbances' (Amaro et al., 2019, p. 145) and both positive and negative upheaval (Holmes et al., 2013) related to becoming a parent, mothers more commonly take on most of the parenting burden particularly related to how they 'establish, understand, and communicate their approach to parenting' (Amaro et al., 2019, p. 145). Specifically, mothers take on more of the actual division of measurable household work, as well as taking on the less seen, invisible labours related to parenting including organizing family schedules and being vigilant of children's emotional state (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019). As a result, their perceptions of their own competence as mothers can be threatened, surrounded by the discourse of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) which individualizes motherhood so that mothers are often pitted against one another instead of working toward collective action that would benefit all parents (e.g. subsidized/affordable, quality childcare) (O'Reilly, 2016). One way

mothers' competence is threatened is through occupation as a working mother or a stay-at-home mother, as mothers are often held to a standard of being uninvolved (if working outside the home) or overinvolved (if a stay-at-home mother), with little systemic support for either, such as universal paid parental leave legislation in the United States of America, among other issues (Shaw et al., 2006).

For the large number of women who work outside of the home, these emotional and time-intensive burdens are increased when they transition into parenthood (Christopher, 2012). Yet, nearly half of American households with children under the age of 18 are supported solely or primarily by mothers (Wang et al., 2013). A recent systematic review of literature shows a growing acceptance of women having outside-of-home employment (Cotter et al., 2011), yet there is still skepticism regarding mothers (particularly of young children) working for wages (Ennis, 2014). Regardless of their path, mothers face a balancing act on a day-to-day basis (Wiant & Brannon, 2021). Enter COVID-19, a worldwide pandemic, that exponentially increased the difficulty of parenting at all levels from prenatal care limitations, postpartum recovery, to childcare and schooling management (Rikli et al., 2020). Relative to men, women have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 impacts on their labour force participation, with women losing most jobs in the initial wave of pandemic job losses and recovering fewer jobs than men (Lofton et al., 2021). These impacts are even more pronounced with mothers, compared to fathers, taking on additional childcare responsibilities even in dual-income households (Zamarro & Jose Prados, 2020).

Recent studies call for more critical examinations of interpersonal and family communication research (Braithwaite et al., 2018; Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019). Family communication includes patterns of communication between parents and children, which can affect not just the parent-child relationship but also how children respond to situations both as children and as adults. Since research shows that mothers react differently to stereotypes embodying intensive motherhood (e.g. tensions between family and home, what an ideal mother is) based on their stay-at-home or working-mother status, these interpersonal – and even passed down over generations within families – communication patterns hold the space to reify or challenge ideals of intensive motherhood (Odenweller et al., 2020). While previous research has examined how new parenthood is understood through dialectical tensions (Stamp, 1994), and more recent research focuses on how new motherhood in the U.S. is constructed (Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019), there is a dearth of information about the constraints and tensions mothers face in their working lives specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine the constraints and tensions that mothers experienced in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we use constraint and negotiation theory frameworks within the scope of intensive motherhood.

Intensive motherhood

Hays (1996) identifies several discourses about motherhood that are perpetuated in the United States as intensive motherhood. These beliefs include how mothers express unconditional love for their children, sacrifice everything and anything for the children's well-being, and focus on providing resources to develop the child(ren) socially, psychosocially, and physically; all of this in an effort to be perceived as a 'good mother' (Baxter

et al., 2012). Intensive motherhood is a normative discourse requiring mothers to focus physical, emotional, psychological, and intellectual time and effort on their children (Sutherland, 2010). The category of 'good mother' is often limited to ideally married, White, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied women who are also middle-class (O'Brien Hallstein, 2017); thus, inherent within intensive motherhood is a constraint about who can be considered a good mother.

Intensive motherhood is further perpetuated through the individualization of mothering experiences where mothers consider their experiences as unique to themselves rather than part of a shared collective of child-rearing experiences (O'Reilly, 2016). O'Reilly (2016) further posits 'ten ideological assumptions of patriarchal [intensive] motherhood,' naming normalization one of the ten that 'limits and restricts maternal identity and practice to one specific mode: the nuclear family (p. 14). By virtue of there being an insider/outsider status to fulfilling intensive motherhood's demands, mothers face constraints whether they subscribe to or eschew the discourse. Moreover, recent research has examined women with prenatal depression and postpartum depression within the context of intensive motherhood, demonstrating the importance of multiple discourses in addition to intensive motherhood on how women are judged and consequently internalize thoughts about themselves (Scharp & Thomas, 2017).

Despite the harmful effects of intensive motherhood, many of which mothers can often identify (Huisman & Joy, 2014), good motherhood status is alluring in its ability to provide a sense of security and self-worth (Ennis, 2014). Because of the individualization and privatization of motherhood, or the belief that motherhood is an individual experience which happens in the home, mothers are often left alone to struggle with the repercussions of intensive motherhood (O'Reilly, 2016). This, of course, is exacerbated during a global pandemic requiring further physical separation, and thus isolation, between mothers and support systems. Yet, COVID-19 provides an opportunity for understanding how mothers negotiate their varied constraints given that times of economic and social change, such as mothers are experiencing now, are when discourses of intensive motherhood are rewritten (O'Reilly, 2016).

Constraint theory and negotiation framework

To assist in identifying and understanding the constraints and tensions facing mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent section explains constraint theory, followed by negotiation framework, to explain their experiences (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Jackson et al., 1993). Constraint theory originally focused on how people manage their leisure activities, yet recent research has examined how mothers perceive social experiences related to child caring using constraint theory (Williams & Murray, 2015).

Constraint theory is a unique theoretical lens as it provides the ability to identify specific constraints mothers face during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also exploring the influence of the constraints on specific behaviours. Crawford and Godbey (1987) proposed three categories of constraints: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. The first, intrapersonal, refers to psychological constructs, such as feelings like stressor preferences related to prior experiences (Crawford et al., 1991). The second, interpersonal, refers to how an individual communicates and interacts with others, including partners,

children, and within social networks, with mutual influence possible (Murray & Howat, 2009). The third, structural, is factors that influence whether and how a person can participate or engage in specific activities (e.g. in the original context of leisure activities, weather would be an example).

Crawford and colleagues (1991) proposed three underpinning propositions for constraint theory. First, the constraints are sequential and hierarchical, with intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints addressed in that order. Second, these are also arranged hierarchically in order of importance, with intrapersonal being the most powerful and proximal. Third, the hierarchy implies levels of social privilege associated with the identified constraints based on gender, education levels, income/socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and others. While the constraints are originally understood as impossible to overcome, other research found that identified constraints did not necessarily predict decreased participation (Kay & Jackson, 1991). Instead, once the constraints are identified, one has the option of using specific strategies to reduce the negative effects of the perceived constraints; this process is called negotiation (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001).

The process of negotiation includes analyzing positive factors, like anticipated benefits of engaging in a specific activity, and negative factors, such as the barriers or constraints of engaging in the same activity. As mentioned above, there are social and psychological benefits to fulfilling intensive motherhood requirements (Ennis, 2014), yet the demands of motherhood are impossible for anyone outside of the target audience (White, affluent, heterosexual, partnered women). Within the context of this study, negotiation will be understood through the process of managing tensions; in the spirit of communication being characterized as inherently tension-filled, with meaning emerging only through interactions with renegotiations of meaning possible (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). In other words, how mothers manage the multiple demands they face (e.g. time between work and home) is an inherently communicative act, surrounded by tension from multiple angles.

Research on mothers' work-family integration is burgeoning. Particularly interesting studies have focused on cultural contradictions and integration, especially for Black middle-class mothers (Dean et al., 2013), and tensions and conflict between work and family life for mothers in higher education (Gaió Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). In one fifty-year review of work-family research, empirical studies overwhelmingly take on a trade-off lens, where career and family investments are not easily managed simultaneously and are instead incompatible (Ernst Kossek et al., 2021). The same study indicates that integrating work-family concerns within the context of changing societal issues (i.e. COVID-19) is of the utmost importance as we work towards ideal work for all. While family and work, for some, are distinctly separate entities of meaning, for others, their work and family lives are intertwined (Ba', 2011). Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a new area of research, towards which the present study will contribute, particularly given the forced enmeshment of work and family when working from or at home became the norm for many. Yet, few studies examine COVID-19's effects on work-family issues; one recent study found that COVID-19 health anxieties (the basic fear of having or contracting COVID-19) was associated with impaired goal progress at work, decreased engagement with one's family, and negative health outcomes (Troughalos et al., 2020). This study extends the present body of research and acknowledges how

most household responsibilities for women in heterosexual partnerships rest on the mother, and this imbalance is even more prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cohen & Hsu, 2020).

Recent family issues scholars have called for research examining how the dominant discourse of intensive motherhood may be challenged, providing space for new, emergent discourses to be constructed (Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019). COVID-19 provides possibilities for reconceiving ‘good’ mothers because of the shift of economic and labour force changes the pandemic has caused (O’Reilly, 2016). The present gap of on how existing intensive motherhood discourses are managed in light of the pandemic’s utter upheaval of daily living provides many questions about how mothers perceive mothering experiences. Based on this acknowledged gap in literature, we sought to investigate experiences about mothering from mothers themselves. Therefore, we pose the following research questions: 1) *What constraints relate to mothering during COVID-19?* 2) *In what ways do these mothers negotiate the existing constraints?*

Methods

For transparency, the authors are both working mothers; therefore, we are able to relate to both the ideologies of what it means to be an ideal worker as well as the traditional expectations of being a mother. Because we are mothers, we have experience in providing care for others, particularly in the context of young children. We must also be reflexive, as we are both White-presenting, middle-class women with male spouses, meaning that we embody some of the privileged positions of some of the institutions we critique (e.g. Kirby et al., 2016). Our reflexive experiences in creating, conducting, and analyzing these interviews are detailed in full (Wiant Cummins & Brannon, 2022). While the data collected from the participants is not representative of all mothers, most participants do fit the normalized ideal of intensive motherhood (O’Brien Hallstein, 2017).

Participants

To participate in the present study, participants were required to be at least eighteen years old and identify as a mother. The participants were largely homogenous, with all eighteen participants identifying as cisgender women. Most ($n = 16$) participants identified themselves as White, with one identifying as Hispanic and one as Asian. Participants lived across the United States. Participants reported between one and four children, whose ages ranged from seven weeks old to adults in their 30s, with most children aged five or younger. Two participants reported that their youngest child(ren) were born after the COVID-19 pandemic began, while two participants were grandmothers as well as mothers. Several mothers reported various health care diagnoses for their children (e.g. ADHD, GAD) or other unique situations, such as being the mother of multiples (i.e. twins) or premature babies (one as early as 30 weeks of gestation). Most participants were working mothers, with approximately half of the women holding advanced degrees. Attempts made to diversify the sample included 1) recruiting from multiple Facebook groups that are racially and ethnically diverse, 2) recruiting mothers who work and mothers who stay at home, and 3) asking participants to reach out to others (e.g. snowball sampling) they felt may be interested in the study.

Procedures

After receiving approval from a large southern university's Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling from two private and geographically diverse Facebook groups across the United States specifically for mothers. The posts detailed the call for mothers to participate in a recorded telephone interview without compensation (Creswell, 2007). Each willing participant contacted the researchers, who discussed the informed consent form with the participant verbally. After agreeing to audio recording, the individual interviews took place during a time of the participant's choosing in May and early June 2020. The goal of the interviews was to better understand how mothers perceived their experiences (e.g. constraints) during COVID-19; as such, the interviews were conducted with a semi-structured interview guide by the co-investigators (Spradley, 1979). As parenting information can be a sensitive topic, telephone interviews were a way to provide a sense of privacy. Eighteen interviews were completed. Participants indicated they had between one and four children, with nine having two children, five with three children, three with one child, and one with four children. Four indicated that they were not working outside of the home, and another two indicated they worked part-time, while the rest described full-time employment. Half of the participants reported advanced degrees (Master's or higher) with others indicating education levels of GED, high school diploma, Associate's degrees, and Bachelor's degrees. When the authors realized the demographic makeup of the participants, we attempted to recruit a more heterogenous sample, but those efforts did not pay off. This may be in part due to the timing of the pandemic, where the individuals who were capable of discussing their experiences with us felt more comfortable than others may have (e.g. those experiencing food or housing insecurities). Therefore, after completing the 18th interview, the researchers felt that data adequacy was accomplished (Levitt et al., 2017).

As in previous research, the first stage of the interview was an introductory or rapport-building stage, wherein descriptive data about the participant was gathered (Williams & Murray, 2015). For example, participants discussed how many children they had, their partner, and any special or unique situations their children faced. Following introductions and rapport-building, the next series of questions focused on how the mothers felt they were succeeding or struggling as mothers, and how they felt comparisons in parenting experiences manifested. These questions (see Appendix A) were designed to encourage reflection by the mothers. The following set of questions focused on their unique situations (identified in the introductory stages), and how the participants negotiated family management. Follow-up questions specific to the COVID-19 pandemic were included, as well as probing questions regarding perceptions of motherhood, like, 'What does it mean to be a mom?' Specific questions prompting reflection of the participants' mothering experiences were not asked directly; rather, probing questions were used to encourage depth of conversation organically echoing Pailthorpe's (2017) argument that this type of process increases richness and validity. A demographics questionnaire was provided for the participants to verbally fill out before the interview was completed, asking participants to identify age, gender, race/ethnicity, and highest level of education. Even after recording ceased, several participants indicated that they

wished to continue the conversation, but due to the assumed nature of being 'off record' these conversations were not recorded and will not be reported.

Interviews ranged in length from 22–54 min, for an average of 36 min per interview.

Ethical considerations

Participants were informed that all participation was voluntary, that they were able to withdraw consent to participate at any point during the study and given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym of their choice. Participants were provided as much time to ask questions about the study as they liked, including the purpose and methodology of the research. All participants agreed to audio recording of the interviews. In some cases, participants were contacted to clarify points that were unclear. The questions presented were designed to minimize risk of participant discomfort. The interviewers, following a modified distress protocol (Draucker et al., 2009), were prepared to provide resources (i.e. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and stress guidelines) (CDC, 2019) to the participants should the mothers indicate distress.

Data analysis

During the interviews, the co-investigators took notes to identify common patterns. The interview recordings, transcribed by a professional transcription company and verified by the co-investigators, yielded 156 single-spaced, typewritten pages covering 10 h and 44 min of interview time. Pseudonyms selected by the participants are reported throughout to ensure confidentiality.

The authors used reflexive thematic analysis to analyze the data through a two-stage process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Daly et al., 1997). The data analysis process was guided by the integration of constraint theory framework (Crawford & Godbey, 1987) and negotiation framework (Jackson et al., 1993), like past research (Williams & Murray, 2015). First, the interview transcripts were read in their entirety by the two authors to understand the depth of the data and compared with the typed field notes to complete the data familiarization step. Then, the authors used open coding to categorize major information content areas, followed by axial coding to identify initial coding categories and subcategories (Creswell, 2007). The authors then used selective coding, in which the transcripts were reviewed to identify specific exemplars that illustrated the themes of the research. These codes then led to the creation of themes. Throughout this process, we used notes to organize ourselves around both the development and hierarchies of the specific concepts, codes, and themes. We defined and named our themes through consensus and debriefed with each other throughout. The transcripts were reread again after creating the codebook to ensure that all relevant information was gathered. As in previous research (Williams & Murray, 2015), interpretation of the generated themes from the thematic stage of analysis were explored within the context of the constraint theory and negotiation frameworks by centring the themes within the three categories (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural).

The subsequent section illuminates the themes that coalesced into the prominent discourses, anchored by specific examples from participants. Direct quotes from the participants are interspersed throughout to demonstrate the results and clarify the findings,

which allows for the specific data to ground the research. The research team checked for participant understanding throughout their interviews to clarify that the preliminary findings were accurate, allowing participants the chance to challenge the potential misunderstandings of the researchers in the process, which was done throughout as a method of validity and as a data trustworthiness check (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Whittemore et al., 2001). Validity was assessed using the four primary criteria of credibility (accurately interpreting participant meaning), authenticity (hearing from different voices), criticality (appraising all aspects of research from design through analysis), and integrity (self-reflexivity) (Whittemore et al., 2001). Our reflexivity added dependability to our interpretation of the data (Wiant Cummins & Brannon, 2022), and the code book provided an audit trail (Yardley, 2008).

Results

The present study focuses on understanding, ‘What constraints relate to mothering during COVID-19?’ Based on constraint theory, mothers indicated that their experiences fell into the three levels of constraints: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Each will be presented, followed with how the mothers negotiated the constraints based on negotiation framework.

Intrapersonal

According to Crawford and Godbey (1987), intrapersonal constraints are experienced individually but influenced socially. Prominent intrapersonal constraints within the data were mothers’ own perceptions of mothering, along with stress, uncertainty, and insufficiency as exacerbated or created by the pandemic. This, even if experienced at the interpersonal or structural level, activated an intrapersonal level response. Intrapersonal constraints were primarily characterized by uncertainty, tension, and change, all forced by circumstances beyond the mothers’ control. Participants spoke frankly about the changes COVID-19 brought to their families in the form of company-wide layoffs they narrowly missed, the increased mental strain in both living at home and working from home, as well as managing childcare needs (e.g. schooling, therapies). For example, Leslie described ‘imposter syndrome’ as happening at both work and at home but gave specific examples as to how ‘home imposter syndrome’ manifested itself, as exemplified by the fact she could not make her daughter ‘lunch with faces on it,’ comparing this example to what she saw other mothers do via social media. As communication via social media was a primary source of connection for Leslie with those not in her immediate family, this was a significant issue. Leslie described that she felt one way mothers show love for their children is by making food that is visually appealing. Yet, she was not alone.

Almost every mother had a similar statement. Feelings of insufficiency, likely already existing in pre-pandemic days, were amplified by the number of tasks and roles mothers juggled during this period of the pandemic, wherein the seemingly delayed development of the children (lacking their formal schooling and therefore related social activities) could seem a reflection on them as mothers. Jennifer also mentioned that she felt that she was not sufficient as a mother, ‘Like, oh, they [other mothers] probably, I don’t

know, do more certain activities with them, or they probably feed them better,' referring to the sudden increase in time of the children being home. Many of the mothers described comparisons with other mothers, even unprompted, indicating that they felt the need to compare with other mothers, even if it was not realistic. When asked how she perceived herself as a mom, Lyla answered, 'I think I will start with how I start to perceive myself as almost inadequate of being a housewife, a full-time caregiver, a full-time stay-at-home-mom.' These roles, while previously performed in some capacity daily, were amplified by the pandemic's requirements that children stay at home for their schooling and that many mothers were also trying to work from home. Likewise, Lillian L said, 'So I definitely beat myself up as a parent over some of these milestones that I think he [her son] should have right now that he doesn't.' Trish, who was employed, stated, 'I think it's more of fighting those constant insecurities, 'Am I doing enough? Am I being present enough?' So, I don't ever feel like I've got it all together.' These feelings of insufficiency, of being an imposter, were directly at odds with many of the descriptions that the same mothers in this study discussed regarding how they parented (often framed as successes), in which they gave narratives of their focus on open communication, encouraging independence, and experiences in efforts to 'produce good humans' as Lillian L described. Essentially, the participants recognized that there were several constraints that the pandemic placed upon them, exacerbating pre-existing constraints, and increasing their tensions. Yet, they simultaneously were negotiating with themselves to reframe their situations with positivity.

Interpersonal

Interpersonal constraints included navigating home-life and work-life activities. Interpersonal constraints can affect a person's preference for specific activities, as well as their participation in the activities (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). While some of the mothers were stay-at-home moms, most worked outside the home pre-pandemic. Many of them described the tensions in navigating parenthood while also being a working mother by beginning their conversations with a comment about how fulfilling their job was for them, in direct relation to their parenthood status (another negotiation). For example, Leslie, who worked in a male-dominated profession, discussed, 'I love my job, I love what I do, I'm good at it, I want to do it, and I want to model that for my kids,' while simultaneously feeling pressured while at work to not discuss her parenthood status, 'I think there's an inherent pressure in the workplace, in a high-level workplace, to not talk about being a mom.' This juxtaposition (or negotiation) that was acknowledged even pre-pandemic is further highlighted at the start of the pandemic, creating immense tensions. Specifically, is it possible to work full-time in an environment where discussing children is discouraged if there is the physical separation from work and home? One can choose not to put up pictures of their children at work, for example. Yet, a working-from-home mother, particularly one managing childcare (as childcare during a pandemic is scarce) and education (if children are of school age) faces multiple layers of pressure – how can one hide one's children away from work while at home (Wiant Cummins & Brannon, 2021)? It seemed that mothering while working from home forced women to question how visibly they wanted to parent to their colleagues or supervisors, while, simultaneously, they were forced to share their

working spaces with their children. This was even more pronounced during the pandemic. Similarly, Lyla said, after reflecting both upon her career and parenting pre- and during COVID-19, ‘At the stage where I am in my career is where I think I’m downplaying parenting, but I would say I am very much aware of dual role that I have.’ Obviously feeling the tension between the demands of work and at home, Lyla’s quote is also indicative of the negotiation process mothers face.

In addition, mothers mentioned relational tensions with romantic partners and children, and maintaining peer motherhood connections with others online instead of face-to-face. For many, they described tensions with their spouse as being further amplified by the pandemic as both parents were suddenly at home with the children simultaneously, for the first time seeing the other partner’s parenting in action constantly. For example, Leslie described that she felt lucky that her husband was a stay-at-home-dad, or as she called him, ‘the default parent.’ Yet, even as she felt they were close, she noted that they differed in a couple of areas, most importantly spanking. She also noted that by being in the same space as she worked from home during the pandemic, she noticed more about their parenting differences, which created more tensions between them. She further stated,

So sometimes the difference in our approaches can cause friction between him and I... It can affect our relationship sometimes, too, but we try to work on that. Because he also as the primary caregiver, sometimes I feel like he also, acts like I’m the hired help, like he has to tell me how to parent my own children and that pisses me off. Because they’re still mine, you know. They’re my kids, I’m not your nanny that you can direct.

Similarly, Kate described that simple things like having the pillows on her bed messed up by her four-year-old after she made it was frustrating – even more so during the pandemic where she did not have much separation between her home and work life. Essentially, the preexisting tensions in the interpersonal relationships were understandably heightened as more time was spent around the relational partner. These tensions were further exacerbated by other, outside constraints like managing time and logistics that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light. Negotiating these imbalances was exemplified by the purposefulness that many participants described, particularly related to finding patience and leaning on their ‘village’ of peers (often mothers facing similar work-life issues, or mothers with children having similar diagnoses) as social support, and in seeking a sense of marital purpose with their spouses.

Structural

Four structural constraints were identified as most prominent: structural inequities, time, finances, and COVID-19 requirements. Structural inequities were discussed by some participants in the context of downplaying needs based on the work environment. Crawford and Godbey (1987) described time as a structural constraint in that if one felt obligations to perform specific actions, one’s ability or opportunity to engage in other activities can be affected. Financial constraints included the need for maintaining at least one income (some participants were the sole breadwinner of their family), yet this constraint was also intertwined with the last: COVID-19. The latter constraint is specific to the required measures in place for public safety: stay-at-home orders, loss of childcare, loss of in-person schooling for school-aged children, social distancing, and quarantines. Further,

one participant disclosed that she lost her job because of pandemic-related layoffs, and others indicated that they were afraid of losing their jobs.

Time was a pivotal constraint for participants. One working mother, Martina, shared a story of how the pandemic's increased demands on her work schedule as a nurse affected interpersonal communication regarding the children. She described how in her role as a mother to her children, she was 'primarily the one that brushed their teeth' but that with her new work schedule, somehow teeth brushing became something that was overlooked, 'And so that's an example of either we didn't communicate well to the nanny, and my husband, I'm sure didn't do a very good job if he brushed their teeth at all,' leading to some tension in managing childcare, particularly as it led to tooth issues and eventually one of their children's molar being removed. Gail described how she loved her children yet lamented the fact that there was 'no free time to just be alone' and that pre-pandemic, she was able to navigate the need for autonomy with runs to Target, a supermarket, but that due to increased demands on her time from both home and work, this outlet was untapped.

Finances were also a concern for participants. Lillian L described how losing her job during the pandemic helped her realize one of the metrics she used to measure the worth of her job: her son's perception of coolness,

It is the weirdest metric that I never expected as a mother was that my career has to be cool for my kid. And, I think that's kinda been something that has come up in the last five weeks that I've just been like, being a career mom is something I'm proud of, showing my son that I am a leader is something I'm proud of, but I didn't realize how much where I work needed to be sort of cool until now.

This example demonstrates how one mother contextualized her job as something intrinsically intertwined with her family and family communication. Losing one's job can be a harrowing and fiscally challenging experience, yet Lillian L tried to centre her job as something that mattered in a specific way for both herself and for her son, in an effort to demonstrate her own happiness, even while facing the challenges of losing her job and income.

COVID-19 presented specific challenges for the mothers in this research, specifically in maintaining connection with others, as structural designs and inequities can facilitate or dissuade the communication inherent in maintaining these connections. Martina recommended that a mother should, 'Ask for help and be part of circles that encourage, that are encouraging' as she found that central to feeling connected with others yet referred to times before the pandemic. Jennifer described social media were one way during the pandemic that she was able to connect with other mothers safely, yet stated, 'I see other moms that make homemade organic [food]' on social media (e.g. the mother acting as the ideal homemaker) creating tension for her, which she followed with the statement,

And maybe it's 'cause you only see how other moms, how they're doing things, and whether or not you even realize it, you do compare yourself to that and you think, 'Well, how many times this week did I lose my shit and yell at my kid?'

These types of comparisons may be interpersonal on their face, but when understood within the larger context of societal expectations and norms placed on mothers related to providing food for their children, the structures mothers reside within (often in

mom groups on social media) play a role in the reinforcement of the structures themselves. COVID-19 constrained mothers' abilities to connect with others almost solely to social media; yet social media also presented a constraint to mothers based on how they compared themselves with the mothers they followed on those platforms.

Mothers described a need for their 'tribe' or 'group' while also acknowledging the limitations of general Facebook mommy groups. For example, Tasha recognized the influence of social media on mothers creating expectations related to parenting:

I think a lot of it comes back to social media. I actually sit and think when our moms were young parents, did they have these same struggles and the same challenges, because there wasn't Facebook and social media and Instagram and all these things, 20 years ago, and so they didn't quite have the same comparisons that are so diligently shoved in their faces ... I think the portrayal of parenthood has been ... I think it's been made out to be a thing that on one hand is very, very hard and very stressful, but on the other hand, it's made out to be something that is just the *most joyous and wonderful thing in the world* [emphasis added to demonstrate a mocking tone]. And it's like, how do you, how is it both?

This passage represents how clearly mothers struggle with what they see as ideal, with what they are faced with daily – exacerbated by the pandemic, of course. Yet, these specific constraints were negotiated with how the mothers anticipated potential benefits of using social media: finding connection and feeling less alone. Further, these interpersonal relationships, even if mediated through social media, were resources for some women to combat the structural constraints of losing their office spaces (and subsequently, their away-from-home networks).

Discussion

The present study makes several contributions to literature related to family and gender issues, particularly communication, perceptions of motherhood, and work-life balance, specifically as the research was centred during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the COVID-19 pandemic was not the primary focus of the original data collection, it presents unforeseen theoretical contributions to both constraint theory and negotiation frameworks. When we collected the data (May-June 2020), participants indicated that they felt many effects of the pandemic, but that they had reached some sort of stride and were not currently in crisis mode; unfortunately, there was little to no foresight as to how the next months would play out, with one participant indicating that she was hopeful to send her children to summer camps. Results from this study challenge intensive motherhood, while simultaneously acknowledging family and work as distinctly separated yet completely intertwined entities during the working-from-home requirements. These findings, illuminated with the lens of constraints and negotiation frameworks, push against established institutions of what motherhood ought to look like, based on how it is.

First, this research echoes Hays (1996) findings regarding societal expectations of intensive motherhood, where Hays (1996) participants reported that they felt 'pressed for time, a little guilty, a bit inadequate, and somewhat ambivalent about their position' (p. 151). While we must be cautious and reflect on the fact that the experiences are from a largely privileged group of women, regardless of challenging life circumstances, our study's participants were primarily White, middle-class, mothers – the target audience

of intensive motherhood (O'Brien Hallstein, 2017). In the present study, nearly two and a half decades and partially through a pandemic later, women are still struggling with similar pressures. COVID-19 reinvigorated intensive motherhood standards (O'Reilly & Green, 2021). For example, Cohen and Hsu (2020) found that women in heterosexual couples spent 15 h more, on average, on education and domestic tasks compared to their male partners. As families navigated quarantines, women were more likely to leave paid work to manage households, with almost 2.4 million women having left the workforce since February 2020 (Silva & Miranda, 2021). As a result, mothers fulfilled intensive motherhood expectations about the role of mothers in relationship to children and the home. In this way, mothers' work during the pandemic was largely child-centred, labour-intensive, and emotionally absorbing (Hays, 1996).

However, while participants did identify that they felt these societal expectations, they reconstructed their responses to the expectations as more 'extensive' than 'intensive' (Christopher, 2012); participants as in Leslie's example above primarily centred their employment on their own personal needs rather than the child(ren)'s. In doing so, the present study extends previous findings concerning how women describe their daily juggling acts (Kirby et al., 2016). For example, Kirby and colleagues (2016) described working mothers as permanently on the defensive since women are taught to (a) accept 'punishments' from children, (b) conceptualize fathers as secondary parents, (c) solve problems on their own, and (d) choose family over work (Kirby et al., 2016). Yet, in this study, women like Lillian L reconstructed their understandings of parenthood and responsibility to demonstrate the growing cultural shift that challenges intensive motherhood ideals. While this reconstruction may have been forced in part by the pandemic, the fact remains that without these changing cultural shifts, future generations cannot obtain true equity. Of course, given that the pandemic has had disproportionate negative effects on racial and ethnic minority communities, these findings should be considered in light of the systemic challenges society places on mothers within these communities (Davis et al., 2020).

This research both echoes and complicates previous research showing that mothers who find communities, even online, that promote feelings of belonging and decreased stress can contribute that same support for other mothers through solidarity and social support (Amaro et al., 2019; Williams & Murray, 2015), echoing a recent call for research examining these issues (Thomas et al., 2014). These types of communities, or mommy groups as some are called, can serve as one option to maintain connectivity even amidst the pandemic where face-to-face communication is discouraged, at times dangerous, and currently without an end in sight. Decreasing the feelings of individualization of mothering experiences by communally coping could be one method towards further disrupting the intensive motherhood ideals (Amaro, 2020). Yet, these same structures can reinforce the feelings of distance and separation between others who are living similar experiences as reported by some participants like Tasha described. Related to community, this study also extends previous research that found that closeness as solely a positive construct is problematic, and that allowing for some distancing as a 'healthy alternative' should be recognized, by illuminating the same need for mothers when managing work and home life within the same space as other family members (Scharp & Thomas, 2016). As in previous research (Williams & Murray, 2015), these findings show that negotiation is not necessarily an individual process, even if intensive

motherhood ideals may attempt to individuate and isolate mothers. Instead, the combination of reflection and understanding of one's own experiences and emotions creates space for a fresher take on mothering if guilt is cast aside.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, this study extends previous research regarding work-life balance. Specifically, this study is among the first to examine how mothers manage their work and home responsibilities and obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous recent research shows how stressful juggling multiple responsibilities with little support can be for mothers (Kirby et al., 2016; Odenweller et al., 2020). Other recent research demonstrates that irregular work shifts can create family conflict, as well as increase psychological parental distress (Zhao et al., 2021). Yet, with the addition of the pandemic, specifically the decrease in childcare, the lack of access to mental health resources, as well as other potential stressors, these responsibilities are exponentially increased at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural levels. While some research describes how specific occupations (e.g. academia) may transition during this period to foster sustainability (as the pandemic shows few signs of being resolved, at least in the United States) little research has examined how mothers from various backgrounds manage communication within their families regarding their home and work balance (Corbera et al., 2020). This is a particularly important gap to fill as mothers make up a large portion of the workforce while simultaneously manage the bulk of childcare and household duties (Cohen & Hsu, 2020). Therefore, this study provides the necessary first glimpses into the narratives of mothers currently in the thick of things.

Implications

Practical and theoretical implications can be drawn from the present study. First, it is vitally important for equity's sake that intensive motherhood ideals are challenged. That women are challenging these ideals, even when constrained through massive external forces like a global pandemic, demonstrates how the tide is shifting against all odds. While the primary caregiving duties are often relinquished to mothers, it was clear from the present study's participants that emphasizing the role of the fathers enabled a more equitable balance of household and family tasks (e.g. Christopher, 2012). In order to make parenting equitable, hooks (2015) writes that women have to relinquish 'motherhood' as a special relationship in which they have power and control over parenting. Instead, we need to teach effective parenting to all.

Practically speaking, knowing that this shift in responsibilities is growing can enable those who communicate with parents for child educational purposes to question their own biases in teacher-parent communication; for example, instead of simply calling the mother when the child is sick at school or daycare, knowing that the other parent (in two-parent households) is the primary contact for these situations would alleviate stress on the mother and enhance communication and self-efficacy for the other parent. Further, since some research is understood through the discourses of time, and the pandemic is certainly a memorable event prompting unprecedented change in how we function as a society, studying pandemic-related communication through the lens of theories that use time as a primary context could provide practitioners involved

in family counselling or social work with the knowledge of helping families create routines built on shared meaning (Parcell, 2013).

Limitations

While there were several strengths to the present study, the limitations must be acknowledged. First, the limitations are consistent with the methodology of semi-structured interviews, where participants self-selected into sharing their personal experiences, limiting the representation of mothers from diverse backgrounds (Collins, 2009; hooks, 2015). While the authors recruited from diverse Facebook groups, we must consciously recognize that COVID-19 exacerbates preexisting systemic strains on women of colour (Davis et al., 2020). Specifically, we had few mothers of colour, thereby limiting multicultural perspectives related to motherhood; these may also be the populations who are more likely to experience food insecurity and other problems and are likely not the first to volunteer for an unpaid study. Second, the sample did not include any mothers who identified as LGBTQ+. Much extant literature focuses on motherhood focuses on women in heterosexual partnerships, so this is a gap existing in both current literature and our study. While some research does examine how co-motherhood is understood and internalized (Suter et al., 2015), this is a particularly large gap in research that should be addressed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Future directions

The acknowledged limitations provide directions for future research. First, the mothers in this study provided examples of how tensions that were already present in their families changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic often intensified. Follow-up studies should be conducted to investigate the long-term implications of these interparental conflicts; for example, relationship outcomes could be predicted by the amount of stress the women faced (e.g. Lansford et al., 2013). Due to the increasing gender imbalance in unemployment records, the issues these families face should be an area of focus (Kurtz, 2021). Another area of importance is how fathers conceptualize and internalize parenthood, particularly with the dramatic economical shifts due to the pandemic, with major implications for families as millions have lost their jobs, been furloughed, and/or have contracted the COVID-19 virus. Some research has begun to focus on collecting individual interviews from both partners and analyzing the data simultaneously, which should be considered for future studies, particularly related to interparental conflict and communication (Chang & Chan, 2007). Likewise, future studies should also continue to examine the long-term effects of the lack of physical separation between home space and workspace, as many people continue to work from home and live at home alongside other members of their household.

Conclusion

This research provides insight into how mothers conceptualize their mothering related specifically to family issues and their work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic, through the lens of constraint theory and negotiation frameworks. Even with the

immense challenges facing them, the mothers in this study confronted the established intensive motherhood narratives surrounding them. Future research should continue to examine how mothers manage their narratives with their family members, particularly for family issues scholars to continue deconstructing and reconstructing societal expectations of motherhood (Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019; Manor, 2021).

Disclosure statement

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your family (number of kids, ages, special needs, unique situations, part of mommy groups).
2. In what ways do you feel you are succeeding as a mom?
3. In what ways do you feel you are struggling as a mom?
4. In what ways do you compare your parenting experiences with other moms?
 - A. Would you share an example?
5. In what ways do you find yourself downplaying your parenting experiences?

6. How has the unique situation of ___ affected how you see yourself as a mom?
7. How do you feel you have been succeeding as a mom during the pandemic?
8. How do you feel you've been struggling during the pandemic?
9. How does your parenting affect your family?
10. Can you talk about how your parents' parenting has influenced yours?
11. How would you describe your parenting style?
12. How would you compare your parenting style to others?
13. What else would you like to add about succeeding or struggling as a mom or what it means to be a mom?