



By Default: How Mothers in Different-Sex Dual-Earner Couples Account for Inequalities in Pandemic Parenting

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Abstract

Mothers did a disproportionate share of the child care during the COVID-19 pandemic—an arrangement that negatively impacted their careers, relationships, and well-being. How did mothers account for these unequal roles? Through interviews and surveys with 55 mothers (and 14 fathers) in different-sex, prepandemic dual-earner couples, we found that mothers (and fathers) justified unequal parenting arrangements based on gendered structural and cultural conditions that made mothers' disproportionate labor seem “practical” and “natural.” These justifications allowed couples to rely on mothers by default rather than through active negotiation. As a result, many mothers did not feel entitled to seek support with child care from fathers or nonparental caregivers and experienced guilt if they did so. These findings help explain why many mothers have not reentered the workforce, why fathers' involvement at home waned as the pandemic progressed, and why the pandemic led to growing preferences for inequalitarian divisions of domestic and paid labor.

Keywords

gender, parenting, COVID-19, employment, qualitative methods

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted normal routines for many U.S. families. Parents of young children faced school and child care closures (Garbe et al. 2020; Landivar et al. 2020), and some lost jobs (Moen, Pedtke, and Flood 2020) or shifted to remote work (Lyttelton, Zang, and Musick 2020). These disruptions left mothers disproportionately responsible for additional child care (Carlson, Petts, and Pepin 2020; Dunatchik et al. 2021; Hertz, Mattes, and Shook 2020; Lyttelton et al. 2020; Sevilla and Smith 2020; Zamarro and Prados 2021), which negatively impacted mothers' careers, relationships, and well-being (Collins, Landivar, et al. 2020; Collins, Ruppner, et al. 2021; Landivar et al. 2020; Lyttelton et al. 2020; Petts, Carlson, and Pepin 2021; Zamarro and Prados 2021).

Building on these findings, we ask how mothers in different-sex, prepandemic dual-earner couples accounted for their pandemic parenting arrangements. Accounts allow people to “negotiate between actions taken and prevailing cultural schemas” (Damaske 2013:438; see also Damaske 2011). Thus, mothers who took on disproportionate shares of pandemic parenting may offer accounts that justify such arrangements even if such arrangements had a high personal cost. Justifying such arrangements may also have

discouraged mothers and others around them from adopting more egalitarian divisions of pandemic parenting. By examining mothers' accounts of pandemic parenting, we can thereby help explain: (1) why so few women reentered the workforce even as schools and child care centers reopened (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS] 2021), (2) why initial increases in father involvement waned as the pandemic progressed (Carlson and Petts 2021), and (3) why the pandemic led to increased public preferences for “traditional” divisions of domestic and paid labor in the United States (Mize, Kaufman, and Petts 2021).

We investigate mothers' accounts using data from a longitudinal qualitative study of families with young children. We focus on mothers in different-sex couples in which both partners were employed prepandemic and who also completed at least one wave of surveys and interviews (N = 55). We also

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incorporate data from surveys and interviews with fathers in some of these couples ($N = 14$) to triangulate mothers' accounts and offer tentative insights into fathers' accounts as well.

Background

Pandemic Parenting

Faced with pandemic-related disruptions, many different-sex couples with young children divided child care unequally. Some fathers increased their child care (Carlson et al. 2020). Yet mothers, especially with young children, increased their own child care more than fathers even when employed full-time (Carlson et al. 2020; Dunatchik et al. 2021; Hertz et al. 2020; Lyttelton et al. 2020; Sevilla and Smith 2020; Zamarro and Prados 2021). Those inequalities also grew as the pandemic progressed, with fathers who initially increased their involvement reducing those contributions over time (Carlson and Petts 2021).

Given these added responsibilities, millions of U.S. mothers reduced their paid work hours or left the workforce (Collins, Ruppner, et al. 2021; Landivar et al. 2020; Petts et al. 2021), and many remained out of the workforce even as the economy improved (BLS 2021). These arrangements also created stress in mothers' relationships and undermined mental health (Lyttelton et al. 2020; Petts et al. 2021; Zamarro and Prados 2021). And they led some families to send their children to in-person school when they would have preferred to keep them home (Calarco, Coleman, and Halpern-Manners 2021).

Thus, it is important to ask how mothers accounted for their unequal roles. The case of mothers in different-sex, pre-pandemic dual-earner couples may be particularly instructive in this regard given that mothers and fathers in these couples may have had an egalitarian division of care prior to the pandemic (Raley, Bianchi, and Wang 2012).

Justifying Mothers' Role as Primary Pandemic Caregivers

People often account for their actions in ways that justify those actions even when those actions caused harm to themselves or others (Damaske 2011, 2013; Scott and Lyman 1968). Damaske (2011), for example, found that when women left the workforce or scaled back their work hours, they justified those choices based not on their personal or economic needs but rather on what they perceived as best "for the family." Similarly, van Hooff (2011) found that young-adult different-sex couples justified inequalitarian divisions of housework by pointing to gendered stereotypes of women as more "naturally" competent with housework and to gendered structures (e.g., gender differences in work hours and pay) that made it "practical" for women to do more at home. Wong (2017), in turn, found that when structural and

cultural constraints prevented young-adult, different-sex, dual-earner couples from achieving egalitarian ideals, they responded by changing their ideals to justify prioritizing men's paid work.

Given these findings, we anticipated that mothers in different-sex, pre-pandemic dual-earner couples would account for their pandemic parenting in ways that justified those arrangements even if they were doing an unequal share.

First, we expected mothers to frame these arrangements as practical, given the structural conditions their families faced during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, many employed, partnered mothers were already doing a greater share of parenting, particularly if they had young children at home (Carlson et al. 2020; Collins 2019; Raley et al. 2012; Yavorsky, Dush, and Schoppe-Sullivan 2015). These inequalities reflected, in part, pre-pandemic gender differences in paid work hours (Cha 2010; Florian 2018; Lu, Wang, and Han 2017; Webber and Williams 2008; Weeden, Cha, and Bucca 2016) and gender differences in earnings (Bertrand, Kamenica, and Pan 2015; Qian 2017; Tichenor 2005). Pandemic layoffs disproportionately impacted women, especially women of color and low-income women, and may thereby have made it seem even more practical to rely on mothers for care (Moen et al. 2020). Meanwhile, for mothers who remained in the workforce, the shift to remote work may have made it seem practical for them to do a greater share of the pandemic parenting, particularly if they were able to do more of their work remotely than their partners were (Carlson et al. 2020; Lyttelton et al. 2020).

Second, we expected mothers to describe their disproportionate parenting as natural in the context of pandemic-related school and child care closures. Gendered stereotypes paint mothers as naturally best suited for caregiving (Gaunt 2006, 2013; Villalobos 2014). These stereotypes lead mothers to sacrifice their needs and aspirations for children's (and fathers') perceived benefit (Collins 2019; Damaske 2011, 2021; Daminger 2019; Gerson 1985; Hays 1998; Hochschild and Machung 2012; Rao 2020). Paternal child care has increased in recent decades (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006; Craig 2006; Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004). Yet fathers do not experience the same caregiving pressures mothers do; instead, they are still primarily expected to be financial providers (Gaunt 2006, 2013; McGill 2014; Milkie and Denny 2014). Thus, amid child care disruptions and other uncertainties, mothers often step in even if it means missing paid work (Usdansky and Wolf 2008; Villalobos 2014).

Of course, not all different-sex, dual-earner couples responded to pandemic school and child care closures by having mothers do more. Some fathers increased their child care time, leading couples to share parenting more equally (Carlson et al. 2020). Couples may have justified those arrangements as practical if fathers lost jobs, if mothers were equal or primary breadwinners, or if, compared to mothers, fathers were able to do as much or more of their work remotely. Those patterns would be consistent with couples'

responses to previous economic downturns (Chesley and Flood 2017; Gough and Killewald 2011). Given gendered cultural pressures, however, some couples may not have seen those “nontraditional” arrangements as desirable long term (Gaunt 2013). That would align with research showing that different-sex couples experiencing unemployment prioritize men’s return to paid work (Rao 2020), and it would help explain why fathers’ involvement in parenting waned as the pandemic progressed (Carlson and Petts 2021).

Methods

Data Collection

We investigate mothers’ accounts of pandemic parenting using the Pandemic Parenting Study (PPS), a longitudinal qualitative study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The PPS builds on the Social Networks and Parenting Study (SNAP), which recruited pregnant women through prenatal clinics in Monroe County, Indiana, from 2018 to 2019. All SNAP mothers who had not opted out of future research were invited by email to participate ($N = 250$). PPS Wave 1 involved web surveys and in-depth interviews, with payments for each component. All mothers who completed Wave 1 surveys ($N = 139$; April 2020) were invited to participate in interviews (April/May 2020). Roughly half completed Wave 1 interviews ($N = 66$), which were conducted with the help of graduate research assistants, audio recorded, and transcribed. PPS Wave 2 followed the same procedures, including surveys ($N = 117$; January/February 2021) and interviews ($N = 45$; February/March 2021). Wave 2 also included surveys ($N = 31$; February/March 2021) and interviews ($N = 11$; February/March 2021) with mothers’ partners.

Participants

In this study, we focus on mothers in different-sex, pre-pandemic dual-earner couples who participated in at least one wave of surveys and interviews (both waves = 46; Wave 1 only = 7; Wave 2 only = 2). All mothers had at least one child under two years of age, and approximately half also had older children, ranging from preschoolers to teenagers. Focusing on mothers with young children is appropriate given that the pandemic’s impact has been particularly pronounced for this group (Collins, Landivar, et al. 2021; Lyttelton et al. 2020). Focusing on interviewed mothers is necessary for capturing mothers’ accounts (Damaske 2011, 2013). Table 1 includes background information for our 55 focal mothers and their partners. For comparison, we include background information for all surveyed and interviewed mothers.

Context and Limitations

Our participants are reflective of the demographics of our recruitment site, Monroe County, Indiana (Census Bureau

2020). Data from the 2019 American Community Survey reveal that of the resident mothers with young children in Monroe County, 86 percent are white alone, 6 percent are black alone, 6 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander alone, and 2 percent are Hispanic/Latina. With respect to educational attainment, 61 percent of Monroe County mothers with young children have not completed a bachelor’s degree, 18 percent have a bachelor’s degree, and 21 percent have an advanced degree. Of these mothers, 44 percent are in married-couple, dual-earner families; 17 percent are married stay-at-home mothers with employed partners; 6 percent are cohabiting and employed; 5 percent are cohabiting stay-at-home mothers; 24 percent are unpartnered and employed; and 6 percent are unpartnered stay-at-home mothers. In terms of employment, 47 percent are working full-time, and 30 percent are working part-time (compared to 90 percent and 6 percent among resident fathers of young children); 35 percent are employed in professional or managerial occupations (compared to 42 percent of resident fathers). Their average household income is \$80,015 (compared to \$90,926 for resident fathers), and their average personal income is \$21,681 (compared to \$59,414 for resident fathers).

Given the local demographics, our study includes only a small number of mothers (and fathers) of color. Twelve mothers of color completed PPS surveys, and 10 completed interviews. Thus, although research has shown that mothers from different racial/ethnic groups experience different work-family pressures (Blum and Deussen 1996; Collins 2005; Dean, Marsh, and Landry 2013; Dow 2019; Florian 2018) and although mothers of color were disproportionately impacted by pandemic layoffs (Moen et al. 2020), we cannot systematically examine whether mothers from different racial/ethnic groups divided parenting differently or offered different accounts of those arrangements. Similarly, and although same-sex couples generally divide paid work and domestic responsibilities more equitably than different-sex couples (Craig and Churchill 2021; Weisshaar 2014), the PPS study included interviews with only one same-sex couple, limiting our consideration of how same-sex couples established and justified pandemic parenting arrangements.

Analyses

We began by determining whether at any point during the pandemic mothers perceived themselves as doing a disproportionate share of child care. Certainly, fathers may have perceived these arrangements differently (Carlson et al. 2020; Christopher 2020; Lee and Waite 2005), a possibility we examine using data from fathers. Yet research has shown that perceptions of household divisions of labor matter more than actual divisions when shaping couples’ experiences of them (Christopher 2020). Thus, given our focus on mothers’ justifications for and responses to pandemic parenting divisions, we rely primarily on mothers’ accounts.

Table 1. Background Characteristics of Natal Mothers and Their Partners.

	Surveys	Interviews	
	All Natal Mothers	All Natal Mothers	Natal Mothers in Different-Sex Dual-Earner Couples
Total	159	82	55
Focal mother's relationship status			
Married	136 (.85)	74 (.90)	51 (.93)
Cohabiting	14 (.09)	4 (.05)	3 (.05)
In a relationship, not cohabiting	5 (.03)	1 (.01)	1 (.02)
Divorced	2 (.01)	2 (.02)	—
Not in a relationship, never married	2 (.01)	1 (.02)	—
Other parent's sex			
Male	155 (.97)	81 (.99)	55 (1.00)
Female/nonbinary/not reported	4 (.02)	1 (.01)	—
Focal mother's race/ethnicity			
White	140 (.88)	72 (.88)	47 (.85)
Black	7 (.04)	4 (.05)	4 (.07)
Latina	5 (.03)	3 (.04)	3 (.05)
Asian American	6 (.04)	3 (.04)	1 (.02)
Indigenous/Native American	1 (.01)	—	—
Other parent's race/ethnicity			
White	132 (.83)	66 (.80)	48 (.87)
Black	10 (.06)	7 (.09)	5 (.09)
Latino/a	9 (.06)	5 (.06)	2 (.04)
Asian American	5 (.03)	3 (.04)	—
Not reported	3 (.02)	1 (.01)	—
Focal mother's education			
No bachelor's degree	52 (.33)	35 (.43)	8 (.15)
Bachelor's degree	51 (.32)	20 (.24)	18 (.33)
Advanced degree	53 (.33)	26 (.32)	29 (.53)
Not reported	3 (.02)	—	—
Other parent's education			
No bachelor's degree	68 (.43)	19 (.23)	25 (.45)
Bachelor's degree	42 (.26)	28 (.34)	14 (.25)
Advanced degree	41 (.26)	35 (.43)	16 (.29)
Not reported	8 (.05)	—	—
Focal mother's prepandemic employment			
Not employed	49 (.31)	26 (.32)	—
Employed part-time	37 (.23)	19 (.23)	18 (.33)
Employed full-time	73 (.46)	37 (.45)	37 (.67)
Focal mother's pandemic employment			
Not employed	62 (.39)	32 (.39)	8 (.15)
Employed part-time (< 30 hours/week)	32 (.20)	18 (.22)	16 (.29)
Employed full-time (≥ 30 hours/week)	59 (.37)	32 (.39)	31 (.56)
Not reported	6 (.04)	—	—
Other parent's prepandemic employment			
Not employed	6 (.04)	1 (.01)	1 (.02)
Employed part-time	5 (.03)	3 (.04)	3 (.05)
Employed full-time	146 (.92)	78 (.95)	51 (.93)
Not reported	2 (.01)	—	—
Other parent's pandemic employment			
Not employed	11 (.07)	5 (.06)	3 (.05)
Employed part-time	14 (.09)	4 (.05)	4 (.07)
Employed full-time	119 (.75)	72 (.88)	48 (.87)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	Surveys	Interviews	
	All Natal Mothers	All Natal Mothers	Natal Mothers in Different-Sex Dual-Earner Couples
Not reported/not sure	15 (.09)	1 (.01)	—
Household income (2019)			
< \$25,000	14 (.09)	5 (.06)	2 (.04)
\$25,000–\$49,999	35 (.22)	21 (.22)	10 (.18)
\$50,000–\$74,999	37 (.23)	20 (.24)	12 (.22)
\$75,000–\$99,999	29 (.18)	17 (.21)	12 (.22)
≥ \$100,000 or more	33 (.21)	20 (.24)	17 (.31)
Not reported	11 (.07)	2 (.02)	2 (.04)

Because some couples changed parenting arrangements during the pandemic, we used a multistage, multimethod approach to determine whether mothers were primary caregivers at any point. We began with mothers' responses to survey questions about the time they and their partners spent with their children at each wave. Second, we considered mothers' responses to interview questions about how the pandemic disrupted their normal paid work and child care arrangements, about a typical day during the pandemic, and about how they and their partners made decisions about paid work and child care. We then completed similar analyses determining whether at any point during the pandemic mothers reported that fathers were primarily responsible for child care or were sharing child care equally.

Next, we examined mothers' interview-based accounts of their pandemic parenting arrangements. We began by reading the transcripts and writing memos identifying key themes (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), which we used to develop focused codes (Deterding and Waters 2021). This process produced two primary categories of justifications for unequal pandemic parenting: *practical* and *natural*. We then applied these codes (and relevant subcodes) to all interviews and identified outlier cases as well.

Finally, using data from fathers who participated in surveys and interviews, we completed a set of analyses parallel to those described previously. We determined whether, according to fathers, mothers did more child care, fathers did more child care, or mothers and fathers divided child care equally at any point during the pandemic. We then examined fathers' accounts of these arrangements. Given the small number of fathers who participated, we used these data to triangulate mothers' accounts and offer a preliminary account of fathers' justifications for unequal pandemic parenting.

Findings

Dividing Pandemic Parenting

Inegalitarian divisions of pandemic parenting were common among the mothers in the different-sex, prepandemic dual-earner couples we interviewed. Most of these mothers

reported that they did a disproportionate share of the parenting for at least part of the pandemic (43 of 55); that included mothers who maintained those arrangements throughout the pandemic (35 of 43) and mothers who reported that for at least some portion of the pandemic, their partners were primarily responsible for child care (2 of 43) or shared child care equally (6 of 43). Other mothers never did a disproportionate share of the pandemic parenting (12); in these couples, either fathers were mostly responsible for parenting (4 of 12) or mothers and fathers shared care equally (8 of 12).

Fathers' accounts of couples' parenting divisions generally aligned with mothers' accounts. Of the 14 male partners of focal mothers who participated in the study, only 3 offered different accounts regarding whether mothers had done more child care at any point during the pandemic. In these cases, discrepancies in mothers' and fathers' accounts of child care time were small. Moreover, all these discrepancies were among couples where both partners worked full-time from home. In April 2020, for example, Gina (white, advanced degree, lawyer; all names are pseudonyms) and her husband Dave (white, bachelor's degree, teacher) were both working remotely and (according to both of them) equally sharing care responsibilities for their toddler, whose child care center closed. After their daughter returned to child care in August 2020, however, Gina said she was spending about an hour more than Dave each day on child care, whereas Dave described an even division of care.

Mothers' Accounts of Traditional Pandemic Parenting Arrangements

Primary-parent mothers generally described their disproportionate share of pandemic parenting as justified even when these arrangements negatively impacted their careers, relationships, or well-being. Mothers justified these arrangements by pointing to structural and cultural conditions that made it seem practical and natural for mothers to do more of the pandemic caregiving. These conditions included: (1) fathers' status as primary breadwinners, (2) mothers' disproportionate availability at home (because of pandemic layoffs

and/or telecommuting), and (3) gendered norms and stereotypes regarding women's roles as caregivers. These dynamics were interrelated, with mothers often mentioning more than one. For clarity, we discuss them each in turn.

Fathers' Status as Primary Breadwinners. When justifying their primary parent roles, mothers often pointed to fathers' status as primary breadwinners. Of the 25 mothers whose partners were primary breadwinners pre-pandemic, 24 reported being primary parent for at least part of the pandemic. By contrast, of the 12 pre-pandemic primary breadwinner mothers, only 7 reported disproportionate responsibilities for pandemic parenting. Similarly, of the 18 pre-pandemic equal-earner mothers, only 12 played the primary caregiver role.

Mothers with primary breadwinner partners described their own paid work as less "valuable" than fathers' and thus more justifiably sacrificed when the pandemic disrupted their child care arrangements. Pre-pandemic, Erica (Latina, advanced degree) worked part-time as a data analyst. Her husband Gabe (Latino, advanced degree) worked full-time as a marketing director and earned most of the family's income (\$75,000–\$99,999 in 2019). During the pandemic, Gabe would "hole up" in their bedroom from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day while Erica worked and cared for the children. Their children's school and child care center reopened in fall 2020, but Erica and Gabe kept them home. To accommodate that decision, Erica cut back to just six hours of paid work a week while Gabe continued working full-time. When asked how she and Gabe came to that arrangement, Erica pointed to Gabe's breadwinner status:

How? Because he's full-time. So, you know, whatever pays the most wins. . . . My husband's job is very demanding, and they talk a lot about flexibility, but at the end of the day if [his boss] sets a meeting, he sets a meeting. You can't not go, even during a pandemic, if you want to keep your job . . . [so] it's primarily me. . . . But yeah, so that was how we decided. Yeah. I mean, it wasn't really a decision. It was just this by default.

As Erica suggests, practical considerations like relative earnings (and the threat of a primary breadwinner losing their job) not only allowed mothers to justify doing more pandemic parenting but also led couples to rely on mothers "by default" rather than through active discussion.

Those by-default decisions discouraged mothers from seeking support from primary breadwinner fathers even when those fathers could have done more at home. Consider Adrienne (white, advanced degree), a part-time speech-language pathologist working full-time remotely while caring for her toddler and preschooler. During the early stage of the pandemic, Adrienne's husband Reggie (white, some college), the primary earner, was also working from home full-time as a web designer. Reggie could have continued working remotely, but he opted to return to working in the office in November 2020. As Adrienne explained:

He has been working outside the home now . . . [and] by the time he gets home . . . I am so sick of all my obligations and responsibilities throughout the day, that I frankly don't even want to talk to anybody. . . . So I know that's not fair and that it's a me issue but that's been really hard. . . . I'm not unhappy all the time. It's just I can't maintain it the whole time and by the end I'll just go to bed and be alone.

Given the stress she faced in combining paid work and parenting, Adrienne could have asked Reggie to continue working from home. And yet, like many other mothers in her position, Adrienne did not seem to feel entitled to that support, seeing her frustrations with her husband as a "me issue" instead.

Mothers' Availability at Home. Mothers who did a disproportionate share of pandemic parenting also justified those arrangements based on their disproportionate availability at home. Of the mothers who could do more of their work remotely than their partners, all but one reported that they did a disproportionate share of child care for at least part of the pandemic. Such arrangements were particularly common among mothers who had more education than their partners (29 of 55). These mothers often worked in pink-collar jobs like teaching or office work, which allowed for remote work during the pandemic (19 of 29), whereas their partners typically worked in blue-collar jobs like construction or manufacturing that required work outside the home.

Inequalities in telecommuting created a double-bind for these mothers, leading them to justify their primary-parent role even when they remained employed full-time. During the pandemic, Patricia (black, some college) transitioned to remote work as a full-time customer service representative for an insurance company, whereas her husband Rodney (black, some high school) continued working full-time in construction. This left Patricia caring for their toddler and two elementary-aged children. When asked how she and her husband came to that arrangement, she explained: "He works in construction. I work from home." That arrangement created substantial challenges for Patricia. As she recalled:

I'm trying to do my work-from-home job, and there's all this ruckus going on in the background and I'm trying to keep my quality good on my calls with my members without violating HIPAA, so it's a challenge. . . . And you start getting a headache. And [the kids] want you to sit and listen to them talk and everything. And it's like: "Just go! Please!" But I have to practice that. I have to work on that more. When it's time to clock out [of work], I need to not clock out mentally as a mother too. Like: "Everybody just leave me alone!"

After their children's school and child care center reopened in the fall of 2020 and after Rodney had his hours cut at his construction job, Patricia and Rodney were able to establish a more egalitarian sharing of child care responsibilities. The decision to send their children back, however, generated

guilt for Patricia, whose middle son struggled with the transition, particularly after his teacher “threaten[ed] to call his parents” following a “meltdown” over a misunderstanding during math. Given that guilt, Patricia reduced her work hours so she could spend more time with her children after school.

Even when fathers were able to do some work remotely, mothers still justified doing more pandemic parenting because being home full-time left them (in their view) better prepared to manage the challenges of combining parenting and paid work. Janet (white, bachelor’s degree), a financial administrator, telecommuted full-time during the pandemic. Janet’s husband Russell (white, advanced degree), a behavioral clinician, mostly worked outside the home, and he spent most evenings caring for his elderly mother, who had cancer. On the rare days Russell did work from home, assisting with care for their toddler and two elementary-aged children quickly led to frustration. As Janet explained:

The few times he stayed home to help, it was totally chaos. And he had zero patience for it. And it was almost worse [than not having him here] because he just got super angry very quickly because he didn’t understand why [the kids] didn’t just behave and do their [school] work. . . . It was almost not worth having him there. . . . Because he didn’t have a great perspective on it, because he wasn’t home every day with me.

Janet and Russell kept their children home during the fall of 2020 despite having the option of in-person school/child care. That arrangement, however, ultimately became too much for Janet to bear:

My mental health was not doing well as a result of [keeping our children home]. . . . It felt really lonely. . . . I had some significant depression issues. I would lose my patience. I would just kind of yell at them. . . . I started drinking a little bit more heavily just because I’m so stressed out. . . . I started gaining weight again, like forty pounds in three months. . . . It’s been really hard, really, really hard. . . . I was in a really dark place. And [my therapist] told me first thing, she’s like: “Get your kids back in school.” So I did. And it has gotten a lot better.

For Janet, returning to in-person school/child care alleviated some of the stress of being the primary pandemic parent and also allowed Janet and Russell to share care more evenly. Just as it did for Patricia, however, that decision also came with guilt. As Janet explained:

I felt nervous about [sending the kids back]. . . . I thought my son would be happy, but then he ended up being sad because he had already formed this bond with his online teacher. It’s better now . . . but with my five-year-old, it was harder to watch. . . . She’s really struggled with in-person kindergarten. . . . And then [sending my toddler back to child care] just broke my heart. I was so scared for her because she had no recollection of being in daycare because she’d been out for almost a year.

Beyond feelings of guilt, some mothers even described themselves as “selfish” for choosing in-person school and/or child care during the pandemic. That included Jada (black, advanced degree), a full-time supply chain director for an agricultural company whose husband Colton (white, bachelor’s degree) is in the military. Explaining their decision to send their children to in-person school and child care in August 2020, Jada noted: “I’m selfish in that that I feel that [schools and child care centers] should [be open] because, I mean, without it I wouldn’t be able to do what I need to do from a work aspect.”

Despite feelings of guilt and selfishness, mothers working outside the home often resumed in-person school and child care as quickly as possible even if their children’s fathers were working full-time from home. Some couples, like Jillian (white, advanced degree, ICU nurse, working outside the home full-time) and Trevor (white, high school, manufacturing engineer, telecommuting full-time), continued relying on grandparents as caregivers, just as they had pre-pandemic, despite the risks of those decisions and despite fathers’ availability at home. As Jillian noted:

I don’t know what we would do [if we couldn’t rely on my in-laws for child care]. . . . There’s not a daycare open at the time of day we go to work [4:30 a.m.]. . . . [But] I’m worried about being an asymptomatic carrier. My mother-in-law is 70 and . . . my father-in-law has COPD, he is over 70 years old. As he puts it, “If I get it, I’m dead.” And he’s probably correct.

In other cases, couples with remote-working fathers and outside-working mothers hired nannies or found alternate child care centers that were open. Cole (white, advanced degree, quality control supervisor for a manufacturing company, working full-time remotely), for example, could have cared for his toddler while his wife Teresa (white, advanced degree, manufacturing director) worked full-time outside the home. Instead, Teresa and Cole hired a full-time nanny the day after their child care center closed. Teresa would then come home in the afternoon to relieve the nanny while Cole continued working. As a result, Teresa was spending about 5 hours a day with their daughter while Cole was spending only 2 to 3. Explaining that decision, Teresa noted: “I’ve been leaving work early, so instead of staying until 5:00, like I was doing before the pandemic, I’m usually leaving now around 3:30. That’s mostly because I need to nurse [breastfeed] again.”

Gendered Caregiving Norms. Mothers’ guilt around in-person school and child care stemmed from gendered norms that positioned them as natural caregivers for children. Those norms, in turn, offered justification for mothers’ primary-parent status even when fathers or other caregivers could have helped more.

Mothers combining remote work and full-time parenting used idealized accounts of stay-at-home motherhood to justify their disproportionate responsibilities at home.

Shawna (white, advanced degree), for example, transitioned to working full-time remotely as a behavior analyst and took over full-time care for their toddler and preschooler whose child care center closed, whereas her husband Caleb (white, some college) continued working full-time as a mechanic. That arrangement was stressful for Shawna. Yet when asked if there were any positive parts of the pandemic, she noted:

I think just being able to be at home more, especially with the kids. It's an unfortunate situation but it's probably something that we'll never be able to do again . . . being able to be a stay-at-home mom but at the same time being able to work. . . . I really like my job, so I definitely wouldn't leave my job but [working outside the home is] just time that we won't get back with our kids, too.

For mothers like Shawna, the cultural value attached to stay-at-home motherhood allowed her to justify being the primary parent despite full-time employment demands.

Similarly, mothers pushed out of paid work roles (through job loss, $N = 3$; furloughs, $N = 3$; or employer-mandated work-hour reductions, $N = 8$) pointed to gendered caregiving norms as a way of framing paid work reductions as beneficial. Deanna (white, some college), for example, lost her part-time food service job at the beginning of the pandemic, whereas her husband Roger (white, high school) was still working full-time outside the home in manufacturing. Asked about these changes, Deanna pointed to the benefits of staying home:

I have been put off of work because of the virus. So with my older kids being out of school, it's been fine because I get to be home with them. . . . I realize how fortunate I am that I got to be home. So I didn't get faced with daycares being closed and schools being closed but still having to go to work. I have a lot of friends and family that . . . had to switch to third shift or get other family members to watch their kids. So while it's tough, I am fortunate in that I got the easy option.

Sierra (black, high school) offered a similar account of the changes she experienced when she lost her full-time food service job, noting: "I'm enjoying it because when I used to work a lot, I used to complain how I didn't have enough time to be with my son. That's one of the good things about it that I can spend a lot of time with him now." Despite being pushed out of the workforce, mothers like Sierra and Deanna used gendered caregiving norms to frame themselves as "fortunate" to stay home, possibly as a way of reducing the psychic impact of job loss on their sense of self (see also Villalobos 2014). By contrast, when Deanna's husband Roger (white, high school) lost his manufacturing job during the summer of 2020, this shift was not perceived as similarly fortunate. Instead, the family focused on getting Roger back to work as quickly as possible (see also Rao 2020). By February 2021, he was working full-time as

a roofer and spending only about 4 hours a day with their children, whereas Deanna remained out of the workforce and was spending 15+ hours a day on child care.

Gendered caregiving norms also limited mothers' sense of entitlement to additional support from fathers even when fathers were home full-time. Candice (white, master's degree) transitioned to working full-time remotely as a non-profit administrator. Her cohabiting partner Terry (white, some college) was furloughed from his full-time food service job. They initially planned to have Terry provide most of the child care while he was home, but their daughter gravitated toward Candice, which made working remotely difficult. As Candice explained:

I have an 11-month-old who's still breastfeeding and knows that I'm home. So, I end up doing a lot of work out on the couch with her while she's there. . . . My husband, he's not working, so it's mostly his responsibility, I guess, to watch her, but I'm definitely still involved throughout the day, as well. I sit on the couch with her playing in her toys. So, I'm there and interacting with her still but also doing work. . . . So, it's not the same quality of work, but it'll pay.

Unlike telecommuting fathers, who would often "hole up" in offices or bedrooms to work undisrupted, and because of gendered caregiving norms, many telecommuting mothers like Candice did not feel entitled to detach from their children or seek additional support from partners who were also home full-time.

Gendered caregiving norms also limited mothers' sense of entitlement to support from nonparental caregivers even if outside caregivers were available to help. During the pandemic, Naomi (white, bachelor's degree), an elementary school teacher, transitioned to remote instruction, whereas her husband Leon (white, high school diploma) worked full-time outside the home maintaining municipal pipelines. Naomi and Leon could have continued relying on Naomi's mother for care for their toddler, as they did prepandemic. Yet after an elderly friend died of COVID-19 in March 2020, Naomi decided it was too risky. Instead, Naomi spent 15+ hours a day with her daughter, whereas Leon spent only 2. As Naomi explained:

[My mom] would help me now, but I'm still trying to limit how much we're around other people. . . . I try to [work] when [my daughter] takes her nap . . . or sometimes in the evening when she goes to bed, but she still gets up every two hours all night long, so it's hard to get anything done. . . . It's really hard to manage getting all of my work done with my daughter here.

When Naomi's school reopened for in-person instruction in October 2020, Naomi still did not feel entitled to support with child care. Instead, she left her teaching job for a (lower paying) office manager position that allowed her to continue working remotely and caring for her daughter.

Mothers' Accounts of Nontraditional Pandemic Parenting Arrangements

Of course, not all parents relied on mothers as primary pandemic caregivers, and some did so only for part of the pandemic. Considering mothers' accounts of these nontraditional divisions, we found that mothers' justifications varied with couples' pandemic parenting trajectories (i.e., whether they maintained those arrangements or abandoned them over time).

Maintaining Nontraditional Parenting Arrangements. In couples that maintained nontraditional arrangements, mothers tended to justify these divisions not just on practical considerations (e.g., mothers' status as equal or primary breadwinners or fathers' disproportionate availability at home) but also on a rejection of the idea that mothers are the natural best caregivers for children. Caitlyn (white, advanced degree) continued working part-time as a registered nurse during the pandemic, whereas her husband Kevin (white, advanced degree) transitioned to telecommuting full-time as an engineer. Kevin began providing part-time care for their two children whose child care center/preschool closed, and Caitlyn continued providing part-time care, just as she had prepandemic. Caitlyn justified that decision based not only on practical considerations but also on her husband's caregiving skills, noting:

The one big thing that was a good thing, my husband being home, he's gotten to see the kids way more than he ever would have. . . . I mean, my husband has been my rock through this. Just when things were so bad health wise [after I had COVID-19 and experienced stroke-like symptoms], he took over with the kids. If he saw me going downhill with a migraine, he just took over 100% of getting the kids to bed, getting them fed, making sure I was okay.

Even after their children returned to part-time child care, Caitlyn and Kevin continued a more equal division of child care than they had prepandemic. On days Caitlyn worked outside the home, all three children went to full-time child care. On days Caitlyn was not working, their two older children went to full-time child care while Caitlyn and Kevin divided care for their infant at home. As Caitlyn explained: "We kind of literally will play tag throughout the day if our son is home." Like Caitlyn, mothers who maintained these equal-sharing arrangements tended to justify them based not only on their practicality (e.g., Kevin's availability at home; Caitlyn's work outside the home) but also on a rejection of the idea that mothers are naturally better suited for care.

Abandoning Nontraditional Parenting Arrangements. By contrast, in couples that abandoned or planned to abandon nontraditional pandemic parenting arrangements, mothers typically justified these decisions on practical considerations alone. That included Vanessa (white, advanced degree), who at the beginning of the pandemic had just

returned to full-time work as a mental health counselor, following six months of paid maternity leave and a year of part-time work. Her husband Patrick (white, bachelor's degree) had just left his job and was using accumulated paid time off before starting a new job in June 2020. Prepandemic, Vanessa's mother cared for their daughter. Because of the COVID risk, they decided Patrick would provide full-time care from March to June—an arrangement Vanessa justified entirely on practical terms. When asked how they decided her husband would care for their daughter full-time, Vanessa said simply: "because he's not working." That arrangement, however, did not work out as well as Vanessa initially anticipated. As she explained in April 2020:

He's not used to being a stay-at-home parent . . . and he thinks I can help parent when I have meetings, and he wants me to help, and there's that conflict and stress. . . . I was in a session earlier today, and [my daughter] comes running in my door, and I was horrified. I'm like [to my patient]—"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry."

Vanessa also described the guilt she felt around not being able to help her daughter, saying:

I think working from home is very difficult . . . so I don't know how long I'll do this. Like, if I hear my child screaming in the other room, it breaks my heart that I can't just go run in there and help.

Unlike Caitlyn, Vanessa did not seem to see her partner as a natural caregiver, and she experienced guilt around not being available to care for her daughter at home. Ultimately, then, and rather than find child care when her husband returned to in-person work, Vanessa quit her job instead. By July 2021, Vanessa was spending 10+ hours a day with their daughter, whereas Patrick had resumed full-time paid work and was spending only 2 hours a day parenting. As Vanessa explained: "We can financially live on his income. That's been nice. . . . I'm just thankful I'm a stay-at-home mom right now." Despite initially establishing nontraditional divisions of pandemic parenting, mothers like Vanessa perceived it as more practical and more natural to leave the workforce, at least for the foreseeable future. Research has shown, in turn, that after dropping out, most mothers have a low likelihood of returning to the workforce, especially to the same careers (Damasko and Frech 2016; Stone 2007).

Some mothers were even more explicit in discussing their longer term preference for more traditional work-family roles. That included Lillian (white, advanced degree), who initially shared parenting equally with her husband Desmond (black, some college) but who planned to adopt a more traditional arrangement as soon as it was practical to do so. As Lillian (white, advanced degree) explained:

My husband basically makes his schedule around mine because I make the primary income. So, we prioritize my work . . . [but] I wanted to be a stay-at-home parent, at least while the kids are

really little. And we just don't have the privilege of me being able to do that. . . . I think [my husband is] embarrassed about how little he's bringing in financially. . . . I think the fact that I'm making more and we're just barely able to support our family is hard for him to explain.

Lillian, a full-time family therapist, earned most of the family's income (\$40,000–\$49,999 in 2019). Her husband Desmond was working part-time as a leasing agent and taking college classes. When the pandemic hit, Lillian could have transitioned to full-time remote work, but she cut her work hours back to just 20 to 29 hours a week so she and Desmond could share child care for their preschooler and toddler and so Desmond could continue working outside the home and taking college classes. Lillian also noted that Desmond was taking classes to increase his chances of becoming the primary breadwinner long term:

There's this constant negotiation in our family about when we switch from my turn to his turn . . . it causes a lot of tension in terms of responsibilities and roles in our house. I get very upset when my husband's not making use of every possible moment to be productive when the kids are asleep. . . . I think that he would feel much prouder [if he were able to work enough that I could stay home]. It would confirm a role for him that he hasn't been able to uphold in a while.

Lillian was able to justify their equitable division of household labor based on short-term practical constraints (her primary breadwinner status and her husband's limited employment prospects without a college degree). Unlike mothers like Caitlyn, however, Lillian did not treat this arrangement as natural or desirable. Instead, she would have preferred to be at home and made decisions (like cutting back her work hours so Desmond could keep working and attending college classes) to help achieve that goal long term.

Fathers' Accounts of Pandemic Parenting

Our focus is on mothers' accounts of pandemic parenting arrangements. Yet fathers in our study provided accounts that echoed what we heard from mothers. Thus, we discuss them briefly here.

Justifying Traditional Divisions of Care. In couples where mothers did a disproportionate share of pandemic parenting, fathers (like mothers) justified such arrangements as practical and natural given mothers' perceived proclivities for care. Breadwinner fathers, for example, tended to view mothers' incomes as inconsequential and thus easily sacrificed for family needs. That included Tom (white, advanced degree), an athletic trainer who continued working outside the home 60+ hours a week, earning most of the family's income (\$75,000–\$99,999 in 2019). Tom's wife Stephanie (white, advanced degree), a part-time physical therapist, cut her paid work substantially. From March 2020 to

February 2021, Stephanie worked for pay only four days total. Explaining that decision, Tom noted simply: "We never really relied on her money." Going a step further, Tom also pointed to gendered stereotypes that positioned mothers as the natural best caregivers for children, saying:

She does it all. . . . How she does it, I don't know. Like, where she finds the time. Days I'm home with the boys by myself, all I can do is focus on keeping 'em alive, and she's doing it all.

Because of structural inequalities and cultural stereotypes, fathers like Tom justified having mothers do more of the pandemic parenting even when that meant sacrificing mothers' careers.

Based on structural conditions and cultural norms, some fathers also justified not using flexible work options or taking on a greater share of pandemic parenting even when they could have done so. When their children's elementary school and child care center closed, Dennis (white, bachelor's degree) continued working full-time in business development for a construction firm, earning most of the family's income (\$100,000–\$149,000 in 2019). His wife Bethany (white, bachelor's degree) left her part-time fitness instructor job and transitioned to full-time caregiving. Dennis was allowed to do some work remotely, but he only used that option during the first few weeks of the pandemic. As he explained:

Even when I was working from home, I could help out some but not like—I still had a job to do. We didn't have a dedicated office. I couldn't watch them play all the time. So we could kind of divvy it up, but mostly it fell to my wife for child care.

As Dennis's comment suggests, he switched to working from the office because, in his view, and unlike Bethany, he "still had a job to do." When asked how he and Bethany made those decisions, Dennis noted:

We made [the decision] because they were asking my wife to step into a manager's position. And she was going to make more money. But it was going to be more red tape and more work and she wanted to hang out and take care of [our toddler] and not spend half of her paycheck finding care. . . . I wish we had a little bit more [money], but I make enough to make it work. And we're on my insurance coverage. So it just made sense. So that's kind of dictated a little bit how we split up chores and work. . . . It's funny because we're not your typical '50s family where we have to fit these roles, and it's fine because we don't feel that way.

As Dennis's comment suggests, he saw their family's unequal division of labor as "fine" because it was based, in his view, not on gender ideologies but rather on practical considerations, including the fact that he "make[s] enough to make it work," that child care would cost "half of *her* paycheck," and that their family already received health insurance through

his employer (a common consideration in couples where mothers worked only part-time and thus did not have access to employer-provided health insurance). Note, however, that Dennis effectively relied on “typical ’50s” gender norms when he treated child care costs as Bethany’s financial responsibility (see also Chaudry 2004; Collins 2019; Damaske 2011; Gerson 1985; Hochschild and Machung 2012; Stone 2007).

Even when they had access to in-person school or child care, fathers pointed to mothers’ availability as justification for keeping children home. Recall Vanessa, who quit her job to stay home with her daughter when her husband Patrick returned to work. They continued those arrangements even after local child care centers reopened, and Patrick hoped to do so long term. When asked if receiving the COVID vaccine would change their child care plans, Patrick said:

Us being vaccinated would not really change our plans for [our daughter] . . . because right now my wife isn’t working, she’s staying home to take care for her. . . . I mean, we want it to be safe for [our daughter], you know? So us being vaccinated is great and all, but it’s still, it’s not going to change how we do stuff with her until the rates are almost nonexistent. And then vaccinating [our daughter], I think we’d be a little more hesitant to vaccinate her than we would ourselves. . . . It’s like as soon as we could, we got it, you know? But with [our daughter] we might think about it, just because she doesn’t have to do anything. She doesn’t have to go out and be exposed to people or anything like that.

Because of Vanessa’s availability to provide care at home, Patrick not only justified keeping their daughter out of child care but even justified the idea of not getting his daughter vaccinated against COVID-19.

Notably, however, even when couples did send their children back to in-person school/child care, fathers did not express the same guilt around those decisions that mothers did. Recall Janet and Russell, who eventually sent their children back to in-person school and child care after Janet struggled to provide full-time care at home. Explaining that decision, Russell noted:

We kind of kept them home for most of [the fall semester] just to see how things were going. And as we viewed it from outside and talked with friends, that gave us a level of comfort that we thought it was okay to send them back. . . . We’re pretty comfortable. I’ve been very, you know—my wife had some trepidation about sending them back, but we’ve been very comfortable with how it’s run.

Whereas mothers like Janet described fear and guilt around sending their children back to in-person school and child care, fathers like Russell often reported more comfort with those decisions. That comfort with child care also allowed fathers to justify having mothers do more child care because they often perceived it as mothers’ choice to keep children home.

Justifying Nontraditional Divisions of Care. Of course, some fathers did as much or more parenting than their partners did. Russell and Janet, for example, were able to establish a more egalitarian division of parenting after their children returned to in-person school and child care. Other fathers initially did as much or more of the pandemic parenting, although many of those fathers (like Patrick) justified shifting to rely primarily on mothers over time (see also Carlson and Petts 2021).

In couples that did maintain nontraditional divisions, fathers (like mothers in these couples) justified such arrangements based not only on practical considerations (e.g., mothers’ equal or primary breadwinner status or fathers’ availability at home) but also on a rejection of gendered assumptions about mothers being the natural caregivers for children. Prepandemic, for example, Nancy (white, master’s degree) was working full-time and earning the bulk of their family’s income (\$100,000–\$149,999 in 2019) as a nurse practitioner. Her husband Ivan (white, bachelor’s degree) was working less than 10 hours a week as an art appraiser while caring for their toddler full-time. Nancy and Ivan continued that arrangement throughout the pandemic, and both Nancy and Ivan described it as justified and desirable. As Ivan noted:

I feel like my relationship with my wife has only been made stronger by this. Every day with my daughter . . . I can just sit and watch her try to figure things out every day and it just brings me so much joy. . . . At the height of the pandemic, my wife’s practice had her on a virtual rotation. . . . So she got to be home and spend a lot more time with [our daughter] and I, which was great. But it was also validating for her because she came to understand that she functions at her best not being the primary child care person. She’s good with [our daughter], but she gets overwhelmed with things that don’t really bother me all that much. So I’m happy for her to be the breadwinner and go out and be validated by that. Likewise, it’s validating to have her express that she’s pleased to be the one going out to the world and having me home with [our daughter].

Like Ivan, fathers that maintained nontraditional parenting divisions justified those arrangements not only on practical considerations but also based on their rejection of the idea that mothers are naturally best suited for care.

Discussion

Overview and Elaborations

In this article, we have examined how mothers in different-sex, prepandemic dual-earner couples accounted for their families’ divisions of pandemic parenting. We found that mothers justified doing a disproportionate share of the pandemic parenting even when those arrangements took a toll on their relationships, mental health, and careers. In these justifications, and consistent with other research on couples’ accounts (Damaske 2011, 2021; Daminger 2019; Hochschild

and Machung 2012; Rao 2020; van Hooff 2011; Wong 2017), mothers (and fathers) pointed to cultural and structural conditions (e.g., fathers' status as primary breadwinners, mothers' disproportionate availability at home, and gendered caregiving norms/stereotypes) that made traditional divisions of pandemic parenting seem both natural and practical. Some mothers even described themselves as fortunate to have lost jobs during the pandemic because it allowed them to avoid the challenges of simultaneously managing parenting and paid work.

These justifications allowed couples to rely on mothers by default rather than through active discussion. As a result, many mothers did not feel entitled to additional support with child care, either from fathers or from nonparental caregivers. That limited sense of entitlement led some mothers to reduce their work hours or leave the workforce rather than send children back to in-person school/child care, and it led mothers who did choose in-person school/child care to experience guilt around those decisions.

Certainly, some couples did establish nontraditional parenting arrangements, at least for part of the pandemic. Notably, however, these couples' trajectories (i.e., whether they maintained nontraditional arrangements) varied with whether they justified those arrangements based only on practical considerations or also on a rejection of traditional gendered caregiving norms. These findings suggest that although practical constraints alone may be enough to push couples into traditional parenting arrangements, practical constraints may be insufficient to maintain nontraditional divisions of care. This aligns with prior research highlighting the challenges couples face in establishing and maintaining egalitarian divisions of parenting and paid work (Damaske 2011, 2021; Daminger 2019; Gerson 1985; Hochschild and Machung 2012; Rao 2020; Stone 2007; van Hooff 2011; Villalobos 2014; Wong 2017).

Limitations and Extensions

This study is not without limitations. Our Indiana-based sample is not representative of U.S. couples with children, particularly in terms of race/ethnicity. Our interviews revealed that mothers (and fathers) of color were among those who justified relying on mothers as primary caregivers. Yet given prepandemic and pandemic-related racial disparities in mothers' work roles and family arrangements (Dow 2019; Florian 2018; Moen et al. 2020), it is possible that the conditions mothers of color encountered during the pandemic led them to different parenting arrangements and to account for those arrangements in different ways than did white mothers, and future research should investigate those possibilities.

Our study is also limited in its ability to speak to the experience of same-sex couples and their divisions of pandemic parenting. One study of same-sex couples in Australia found that mothers' experiences in same-sex couples were

not substantively different from mothers' experiences in different-sex couples (Craig and Churchill 2021). Our study only included interviews with one same-sex (lesbian) couple, but their experience aligned with these findings. Holly (white, doctoral degree), who was the natal parent, reported that she did a disproportionate share of parenting throughout the pandemic, and her wife Kathleen (white, master's degree) agreed. Explaining that arrangement, Holly and Kathleen pointed to the fact that prepandemic, Holly was working only part-time as a data analyst and Kathleen was working full-time as a network engineer and earning most of the family's income (\$75,000–\$99,999 in 2019). Holly also saw herself as the more natural caregiver for their daughter, noting that working from home without child care was easier for her than her wife:

The [not having] child care thing is making it harder for [my wife] than for me. I am more of a baby and toddler person than she is and so not having a break [from our daughter] is kind of hard for me but for her it's extremely hard.

Essentially, and like many of the mothers in different-sex dual-earner couples, Holly found herself doing a disproportionate share of child care and even reduced her work hours to accommodate those responsibilities. Like mothers in different-sex dual-earner couples, Holly also justified those arrangements based on cultural and structural conditions, such as Kathleen's primary breadwinner status, Holly's disproportionate availability at home, and gendered norms that positioned Holly (as the natal parent) as the one more naturally suited for child care. Of course, one couple's experience is not indicative of the experiences of same-sex couples in the United States more generally, and we thus encourage other scholars to investigate how same-sex U.S. couples accounted for their pandemic parenting arrangements.

Implications and Conclusions

Despite their limitations, our findings have important implications. They suggest that many mothers (and fathers) in dual-earner different-sex couples perceive traditional parenting arrangements as justified and desirable even when those arrangements are damaging mothers' careers, relationships, and well-being. These perceptions help explain why many women remained out of the workforce (BLS 2021) even as schools and child care centers reopened and even as businesses rehired laid-off workers. They also help explain why many fathers who increased their parenting at the start of the pandemic relied more heavily on mothers as the pandemic progressed (Carlson and Petts 2021). And they help explain evidence of a growing preference in the United States for traditionally gendered divisions of parenting and paid work (Mize et al. 2021).

Given the pandemic's toll on mothers and families with young children, policymakers have proposed an American

Families Plan that mandates paid parental leave, expands access to affordable child care, reforms unemployment systems, and increases child tax credits (White House 2021). These policies would likely reduce the structural constraints that made it seem practical for so many dual-earner different-sex couples to rely on mothers by default. And yet, if couples and especially mothers perceived traditional pandemic parenting arrangements as justified or even desirable, they may not advocate for policies that would ease the burden on mothers and make it easier for couples to establish and maintain more egalitarian divisions of care. Thus, these findings also warn of potential pushback against proposed policy change even from those who would benefit most.

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