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Breadwinner Mothers of School-Aged Children during COVID-19:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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A Dissertation Submitted to The Graduate School of the University of Missouri-St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
Doctoral of Philosophy in Education with an emphasis in Counseling

May 2022

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ABSTRACT

Working mothers have long faced myriad challenges to optimal work-life balance, with evidence of negative consequences to their physical and mental wellbeing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, working mothers reported unprecedented difficulties, though inquiry into *breadwinner* mothers' experiences remained lacking. This research focused specifically on the experiences of breadwinner mothers of elementary school-aged children who navigated remote working and remote schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. A diverse sample of 12 breadwinner mothers across the United States completed semi-structured interviews focusing on the impact of the pandemic on their daily lives, as well as how they understood their experiences in light of dominant cultural norms regarding motherhood, work, breadwinning, and identity areas. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), intersectionality, and gender theories informed the research design and analysis. Data analyses yielded four overarching themes: (1) *Intensification of an Already Non-Stop and Exhausting "Juggling Act"* (2), *Left to One's Own Devices, Figuratively and Sometimes Literally* (3), *Merging of Work and Home Life as a Double-Edged Sword*; and (4) *Ambivalence about Breadwinner Status*. Findings lend support to research indicating breadwinner mothers commonly fulfill a role of outsized responsibility in caretaking and decision-making in ways often invisible, resulting in role strain, cognitive overload, and decreased self-care. Discussion of findings consider limitations, further research, and implications for counseling practice and advocacy to better support breadwinner mothers in the aftermath of the pandemic and beyond.

Keywords: *breadwinner mothers; COVID-19 pandemic; work-life balance; intersectionality; counseling*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Most of the labor in the world is done by women: that is a fact.

-Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 1986

Introduction

According to analyses of the most currently available decennial census data at the time of this research, mothers in the United States were the sole or primary breadwinners in approximately 4 in 10 households with children ages 18 or younger (Wang et al., 2013). These breadwinning mothers comprised two distinct groups: single moms, who were disproportionately women of color, younger, and lived below the federal poverty line; and married mothers, who tended to be White, older, college-educated, middle to upper-class, and in dual career partnerships. Many mothers experience systemic and structural challenges in the workplace differentially in relation to personal identities and social location (e.g., Collins, 2019; Jackson & Slater, 2017). Further, it has been theorized that *all* working mothers experience conflicting tensions between prominent cultural ideologies of motherhood (Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2007) and gendered notions of the ideal worker based on masculine norms that structure the workplace (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Williams, 2000, 2010). Consequently, working mothers from various backgrounds, including breadwinning mothers, often attempt to meet multiple and conflicting expectations in both domestic and workplace spheres, frequently making the notion of *work-family balance* feel like an unattainable ideal (Gerson, 2010; Williams, 2010), and potentially resulting in negative consequences for mothers' mental health and wellbeing overall (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Kramer & Pak,

2018). During the global COVID-19 pandemic, working mothers felt the strain of work-life balance at unprecedented levels (Heggeness, 2020; Heggeness & Fields, 2020; Kashen et al., 2020). This may have been especially true for breadwinning mothers who maintained their role as primary economic providers for their households at the same time as navigating remote schooling for their children.

In relation to gender role norms and biases, many working mothers also commonly experience what has been coined as “*the second shift*” (Hochschild, 2012). This refers to the well documented reality that working mothers in dual-income heterosexual marriages spend more hours on unpaid household labor and childcare than do their male partners (Bianchi et al., 2012; Horne et al., 2018; Negraia et al., 2018; Raley et al., 2012), even when they are the primary breadwinners (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Pew Research Center [PRC], 2018). Meanwhile, single, non-partnered, breadwinning mothers must frequently manage it all. Many working mothers may utilize the support of extended family and kin networks to help manage workplace and childrearing responsibilities. This is especially true for single working mothers from rural areas (Son & Bauer, 2009), mothers from marginalized racial, ethnic, and class groups (e.g., Black, Latina, immigrant, poor and working class) who have historically long integrated work with motherhood (Collins, 2009; Coontz, 1997; Edwards, 2001), and mothers for whom it has been culturally normative to focus on their careers for the good of family and community (e.g., educated black women; Giele, 2008). Nevertheless, when compared to other developed countries, the lack of institutional and social supports for working mothers and families in the United States (e.g., paid maternity leave, universal childcare, flexible work policies) across the board has been decried as deeply problematic

(Collins, 2019; Rice & Else-Quest, 2006; Williams, 2010), and contributes further to the feminization of poverty globally (World Health Organization [WHO], 2015).

In focusing on positive changes that have occurred over time, some work-family researchers have pointed to the gains made in gender equity in the workplace over recent decades (Giele, 2008; Williams, 2010), as well as evidence suggesting that the personal, economic, and social benefits of combining paid work with motherhood are overall perceived by women as outweighing the challenges (e.g., Barnett et al., 2018; Furdyna et al., 2008; Giele, 2008). Nevertheless, researchers have also shown that the high degree of role balancing involved in combining work and motherhood within contemporary society given hegemonic ideologies of motherhood and the ideal worker frequently results in significant stress, anxiety, fatigue, and depressive symptoms (e.g., Kramer & Pak, 2018; O'Brien et al., 2014). It may also result in social and relational concerns, including work-family conflict, marital stress, and parent-child conflict (e.g., Zhao et al., 2020). This has been further complicated by dramatic changes in technology over the last several decades, as expectations of the ideal worker in many industries have come to integrate an assumption of long hours and/or continuous worker availability and connectivity (Lott & Abendroth, 2020; van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020). Often this may occur without regard to geography, space, or other issues complicating the often implicit assumption that integration of domestic and workplace spheres should center the worker role (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Sullivan & Smithson, 2007).

During the global COVID-19 pandemic first declared in March of 2020 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020a), competing ideologies related to motherhood and the ideal worker may have collided in new and unexpected ways. In the case of working

mothers of school-aged children who were able to continue working remotely, preliminary and anecdotal evidence has indicated that integration of domestic and workplace spheres may have intensified the already significant workload and pressures of many working mothers (Heggeness, 2020; Kashen et al., 2020). In light of nationwide school closures that impacted more than 50 million children across the United States (Education Week, 2021), working mothers and families were suddenly tasked with facilitating remote schooling for their children, on top of all of the other commonly experienced stressors related to the pandemic (e.g., stress, anxiety, social distancing; American Psychological Association [APA], 2020; Brooks et al., 2020). For breadwinning mothers, whether single, married, or partnered, these stressors may have been compounded by added pressures experienced due to their primary earner status (Chesley, 2017; Kaufman, 2013).

At the time of this literature review, a number of researchers had conducted large-scale studies in efforts to illuminate the experiences of working mothers during the pandemic at large (e.g., Heggeness, 2020; Heggeness & Fields, 2020; Kashen et al., 2020). However, given the immediacy of the COVID-19 context, there remained a need for qualitative research focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on the daily lives of working mothers from the perspective of these working mothers *themselves*. Although accounts of working mothers' personal experiences have been documented in various news outlets and reports (e.g., Gupta, 2020; Kashen et al., 2020), at the time of this research, there had been no phenomenological inquiries into the experiences of *breadwinning* mothers who navigated both remote work and remote schooling for their children during the pandemic. The experiences of mothers who were also primary earners

in their households was of interest given that primary earning among women, though increasingly prevalent, still runs counter to social expectations and norms within the broad cultural context of the United States.

Given the dearth of research focusing on the experiences and perspectives of breadwinning mothers both in general and during the pandemic, this qualitative phenomenological research inquiry examined how breadwinning mothers of various relational statuses managed and made meaning of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, this study investigated the experiences of breadwinning mothers of school-aged children (5-12 years of age) who concurrently worked remotely and facilitated their children's remote schooling, either on their own or in tandem with a spouse, partner, or live-in family member, thereby enacting responsibilities of both work and mothering within the same physical space during this unique historical moment. In addition to better understanding the impact of these experiences on these mothers' daily routines and lives, I also aimed to amplify the voices of breadwinning mothers themselves, including how they understood and made meaning of their experiences in relation to dominant ideologies of motherhood and the ideal worker, as well as how their perspectives were shaped by their unique social and cultural identities. It was my hope that insights gained would lend to implications for how counselors might more effectively work with and advocate for not just breadwinning mothers of various backgrounds and social identities, but all working mothers. Therefore, this research employed interpretative phenomenological inquiry, and was guided by frameworks of "doing" and "undoing gender," intersectionality theory, and scholarly literature and

research examining the intersections of motherhood, work, and the relationship of these to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic within the United States.

Organization of Literature Review

In order to provide theoretical and contextual basis for the proposed inquiry in a way that narrows to the proposed area of investigation, the literature review is organized as follows. In the first section, I begin with a broad overview of mothers and work, including examination of trends over time leading to the ubiquity of mothers in the workforce from all backgrounds, as well as systemic and structural barriers, biases, and challenges that have historically posed challenges for working mothers differential to social location. This section also introduces the incremental rise of breadwinning mothers in the United States, and presents empirical research findings pertaining to the prevalence, characteristics, and experiences of this group of mothers.

In the second section, I examine theory and research pertaining to identities and ideologies of motherhood, ideal workers, and the tensions between intersecting roles, identities, and ideologies for working mothers of various backgrounds and statuses. This section also reviews several theories in further depth that form the theoretical framework of the present study: “doing” and “undoing gender” theories and intersectionality theory.

In the third section, I review and summarize the most pertinent theory and research concerning benefits and challenges of work-life integration for working mothers from within the vast body of work-life family studies literature. This includes review of studies documenting the positive benefits of successful work life-integration experienced by working mothers, as well as research examining the challenges and negative impacts of work-life integration and balancing, including relationships between work-family

conflict, role strain, and negative physical, mental health, social, and relational impacts. I conclude this section with a brief discussion pertaining to the impact of technology and remote working on work-life integration both in general and in specific relation to working mothers.

In the fourth and final section of the literature review, I focus on the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. After a brief overview of the scope and impact of the pandemic, as currently known based on published research at the time of this study, I focus attention to the impact of the pandemic on women overall, and then narrow the scope to examine preliminary research and speculations concerning the impact to working mothers of school-aged children. This paves the way for the present study, which focused specific attention to breadwinning mothers of school-aged children who navigated both remote working and facilitating remote schooling for their children during the initial phases of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Mothers and Work

Mothers in the Workforce: Changing Trends

Mothers' workforce participation in the United States has steadily grown throughout the course of the 20th century (Goldin & Mitchell, 2017). Whereas less than half of mothers with dependent aged children worked outside the home approximately 50 years ago (Bianchi et al., 2012), today the vast majority—approximately two-thirds—of mothers in the United States with children under the ages of 18 work outside the home (PRC, 2018). Women's increased participation in the paid labor force has been attributed to a broad range of interrelated factors, including legal reforms advancing women's rights generally, direct investment in women's skills and increases in education, technological

advancements impacting the domestic sphere, and delays in childbearing and reductions in family size incrementally over time (Goldin & Mitchell, 2017; PRC, 2018; Williams, 2010). Also important have been macro-level economic and structural social shifts, such as after World War II and the 2009 Great Recession, both of which lessened the relative participation of men in the workforce in proportion to women (Edwards, 2001; Harrington et al., 2010), resulting in an increase in gender-atypical work-family scenarios with the potential to propel forward gender equity gains (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009; Williams, 2010). However, feminist scholars and others have aptly pointed out that changes in mothers' workforce participation has been more pronounced with respect to White, married, middle-class mothers who formerly had been more likely to occupy a homemaker role than were Black, Hispanic/Latina/x, immigrant, and poor/working class mothers, all of whom have long integrated work with motherhood (Collins, 2009; Coontz, 1997; Giele, 2008).

Among married working mothers, rises in education level over time are believed to have played a particularly important role in the gradual supplanting of the homemaker/breadwinner family model by the two-adult worker family model (Gerson, 2010; Giele, 2008). In fact, in only 16% of two-parent families today does the husband have a higher education level than his wife, with 23% of mothers better educated than the father, and the majority (61%) having similar education levels (Wang et al., 2013). Overall, women now outpace men when it comes to postsecondary college degree completion, with an examination of achievement by racial demographics over a 40-year period revealing that Black and Hispanic women have made the greatest gains (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). However, despite advancements in women's

educational levels across all racial groups, women remain woefully under-represented in business, management, politics, STEM fields, among tenured faculty in academia, and other leadership roles in the United States (Canetto et al., 2017; Warner et al., 2018). This has contributed to the stagnating gender wage gap (Misra & Murray-Close, 2014), with earning disparities widening for women in minority and marginalized racial demographic groups (Christie-Mizell et al., 2007) and a larger wage gap between mothers and nonmothers than between women and men generally (Lips, 2018). When it comes to working mothers, nearly 75% of heterosexual married mothers in dual-income households are still the lower earners, with analyses of 2010 decennial census data revealing that the median income of previously married single mothers was \$29,000 annually and just \$17,400 for never married single mothers (Wang et al., 2013).

Working Mothers: Systemic and Structural Barriers, Biases, and Challenges

Although many women have indicated that the personal, economic, and social benefits of combining work with motherhood outweigh the challenges (e.g., Damaske et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2012), working mothers continue to face various systemic and structural barriers, biases, and challenges when combining motherhood with workforce participation. These challenges include both direct and subtle forms of pregnancy and maternal discrimination, such as biases in hiring, loss of career opportunities, and workplace retaliation, including when taking advantage of policies designed to make the workplace more “family-friendly” (Collins, 2019; Gatrell & Cooper, 2016; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; National Partnership for Women & Families [NPWF], 2016). A ‘*motherhood penalty*’ in the form of decreased earnings, being passed over for leadership and professional advancement opportunities, and employer assumptions of reduced

commitment and competence when compared to childless women have also been documented (Bear & Glick, 2017; Christie-Mizell et al., 2007; Crosby et al., 2004; Fuegen et al., 2004). Finally, although not solely limited to the experiences of mothers, others have described ‘backlash effects’ experienced by women in the workplace who attempt to negotiate raises, promotions, and other benefits because such agentic behaviors are perceived to demonstrate non-conformity to traditional gender role stereotypes of women as supportive and submissive (O’Neill & O’Reilly III, 2011; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). All of these may contribute to significant role strain, work-family conflict, and challenges achieving a desirable level of work-life balance (e.g., Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; O’Brien et al., 2014).

In addition to systemic and structural issues, some have also argued that gender inequality in both work and domestic spheres is reinforced by the ways that individuals differentially frame men and women’s employment status (Potuchek, 1992; Rao, 2017). Nearly 30 years ago, Potuchek (1992) found that New England wives in dual-earner couples semantically framed breadwinning largely in terms of their husband’s employment, even when earnings were near equal. Several decades later, Rao (2017) found that heterosexual married couples viewed the husband’s unemployment as a serious concern to be rectified as soon as possible, whereas wives’ unemployment was generally seen as normative and not imminently problematic. Although both samples were limited in diversity characteristics, these and other studies appear to support the contention that social views with respect to gender norms and ideology have stalled (Cotter et al., 2011; England, 2010; Warren, 2007), with important implications for all genders. Thus, both women *and* men (as well as other non-binary identified individuals)

remain bound by ideology that continues to regard men as the primary economic providers, despite gender equity gains for women and the increase of women breadwinners in a significant number of U.S. households.

The Rise of Breadwinning Mothers

Today not only are mothers working outside the home more than ever before, but mothers are increasingly also the breadwinners (Croft et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2013). Breadwinning has been defined as the primary provision of material and economic resources for one's family (Chesley, 2017). Historically, breadwinning has been conceptualized in terms of traditional notions of male breadwinner/female homemaker family arrangements that, though in decline today, remain largely supported by workplace and governmental policy (Chesley, 2017; Warren, 2007), as well as social and ideological discourse (Williams, 2000, 2010).

Analyses of the most currently available decennial census data at the time of this research study revealed that mothers were breadwinners in 4 of 10 households with children under the ages of 18 (Wang et al., 2013). This figure represented a 30% increase from 1960 when just 11% of households with minor aged children were headed by a female breadwinner, defined based on census data as mothers of dependent aged (0-17) children who were either the sole or primary economic providers in their households. Because of how census data is collected, this included various types of single breadwinner mothers who were heads of households at the time of survey collection (e.g., never married, divorced, separated, widowed, married but the spouse is not in the household), as well as married breadwinner mothers who earned more than their husbands. It should be noted that the decennial census data upon which these analyses

were based have several inherent limitations. Namely, the data did not account for non-heterosexual marriages or partnerships, nor did it account for single or married couples who did not identify at least one of the individuals as the head of household.

In general, Wang et al. (2013) found that breadwinning mothers comprised two main groups of women, but with very distinct characteristics. The largest share of breadwinner moms (63%) were single mothers who were disproportionately women of color (e.g., Black or Hispanic), younger, less likely to have a college degree, and lived below the federal poverty line, with a median income of just \$23,000 annually. These single head of household mothers—approximately 8.6 million women—constituted the sole breadwinner for 25.3% of all households with children, a more than three-fold increase from 1960 when just 7.3% of households were headed by single breadwinner mothers. Of the single breadwinning mothers, 50% identified as being either divorced, separated, or widowed and 44% identified as having never married. Wang et al. noted that the percentage of single mothers who identified as having never married represented a significant trend upwards from 1960 when only 4% of single mothers surveyed indicated having never married.

The other group of breadwinning mothers (37%) were married women who were the higher (or sole) earner in their households, and were disproportionately White, older, college-educated, and middle to upper-class. This group of married breadwinner moms reflected an even sharper acceleration in growth, comprising 15% of all households with children, which was nearly four times higher than the just 3.5% of all households with children in 1960 who reported having a breadwinner mom. Among married breadwinner moms, the majority (93%) were the higher earner in dual-income households, with a

combined family income that was significantly higher than the national average: in 2011, the median income for households with a breadwinner mother was \$79,800, which was slightly higher than the median income of households with a breadwinner father (\$78,000) and significantly higher than the national average (\$57,100). In 2011, only 6.7% of married couples with children under age 18 reported that the mother was the sole breadwinner.

Already a relatively small group of mothers, other researchers have found that married, heterosexual breadwinning mothers who earn between 75-100% of the family income represent a particularly unusual family type. Based on analyses of Current Population Survey (CPS) data over a 34-year timespan (1976-2009), Kramer et al. (2013) estimated that approximately 5.6% of married couples with children had work-family arrangements in which the wife/mother earned at least 75% of the family income, and in only 3.5% of cases did the mother earn 100% of the family income while the father stayed at home. Research focusing specifically on the prevalence and experiences of stay-at-home fathers has revealed that economic conditions are a key factor explaining these gender-atypical family arrangements, with more stay-at-home fathers than stay-at-home mothers consistently reporting an intention to work (Chesley, 2011; Chesley & Flood, 2017; Kramer et al., 2015; Kramer & Kramer, 2016). The economic need undergirding men's intentions to work has been attributed to both the gender wage gap, meaning that primary breadwinning mothers (e.g., 75-100% of family income) in many instances do not earn sufficiently to support the family unit (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Wang et al., 2013), pervasive gender norms on a broad social level that equate breadwinning with

masculinity and fathering (Doucet, 2006; Warren, 2007), and individual differences in adherence to traditional gender ideology (Kramer & Kramer, 2016).

Thus, the findings of these studies appear to support the contention that married breadwinning mothers are part of a gender-atypical type of family arrangement that places these mothers in a role that runs counter to gender normative expectations (Chesley, 2011, 2017). Additionally, although at first glance the rise in breadwinning mothers when viewed monolithically and uncritically may seem like a significant step towards gender equity, these and other findings indicate that both single mothers, as well as many married breadwinning mothers who earn all or the larger share of family income, may more likely be at economic risk than working mothers in traditional family arrangements or breadwinning mothers whose spouses also earn a significant portion of family income (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Kramer et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2013). Moreover, research has also found that, in most cases, wives' income advantage is not persistent at the five-year mark (Winslow-Bowe, 2006), serving to further undercut arguments that women's increased breadwinning is a true signifier of progress towards gender egalitarianism.

Nevertheless, given the rise of breadwinning mothers as an overall trend, research examining attitudes and experiences pertaining to breadwinning mothers is a growing area of inquiry. In terms of social attitudes overall, a large-scale ($N = 1,003$) nationally representative omnibus public opinion survey found that, in general, the public is conflicted about the rising prevalence of breadwinning mothers (Wang et al., 2013). Most notably with respect to married mothers, although the majority of participants did not agree with the statement that it is bad for a marriage if a wife out-earns her spouse, they

were far more likely to endorse the idea that children are better off if mothers stay at home and do not work (51%) versus than if fathers stay at home (8%), underscoring gendered discourses pertaining to both childrearing (Hays, 1996; Williams, 2010) and breadwinning (Olmstead et al., 2009). Additionally, a large share of respondents (64%) also endorsed the view that the rise of single mothers (who by default are usually the sole economic provider) in the United States is a “big problem.” Although this represents a decrease from the previous decade when 71% of the public felt this way, it underscores the ongoing social marginalization of single mothers regardless of earning status, which may be further compounded by negative social experiences or discrimination incurred due to other intersecting marginalized identities.

Several other researchers have also found evidence that both breadwinner mothers and stay-at-home fathers perceive negative social stigma and judgement due to nonconformity to traditional gender role norms (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005; Chesley, 2017; Gaunt, 2013; Holmes et al., 2020). Notably, in their series of three studies, Brescoll and Uhlmann (2005) found that negative affective reactions to nontraditional parents (e.g., breadwinner mothers, stay-at-home fathers) were shared consensually by a racially diverse sample of both men and women. With respect to breadwinning mothers, negative evaluations decreased when these working mothers were described as working for economic reasons rather than to fulfill personal ambitions, but motivations for working did not influence participants’ reactions towards employed fathers. The researchers pointed to this finding as evidence for an unfair double standard that is applied to working mothers.

In addition to research analyzing how breadwinner mothers have been viewed by others, other researchers have focused attention to the perceptions and experiences of breadwinning mothers themselves (Chesley, 2011, 2017; Medved, 2016; Meisenbach, 2009; Potuchek, 1992). Potuchek (1992) was among the first to examine the meaning attached to breadwinning from the perspective of women, noting that researchers prior to this point had failed to define breadwinning beyond simply women's labor force participation: "...breadwinning is not just a matter of behavior, but of the meaning attached to that behavior" (p. 549). Through a lens of gender theory, Potuchek's qualitative research defined employed wives ($N = 153$) orientations' to breadwinning relative to factors of financial support, job centrality, and gender role norms, finding that all three were viewed alternatively as either constraints or opportunities. Although the sample was relatively homogenous (e.g., White, married, cisgender heterosexual women), and breadwinning was not defined in terms of a primary earner role, it represented one of the first studies to examine the construct of breadwinning from the perspectives of employed women.

Critiquing the predominant focus in breadwinning research on the experiences of either men or the couple unit, Meisenbach's (2009) phenomenological inquiry examined how 15 female breadwinners in other-sex marriages constructed their experiences of breadwinning in relation to their personal and social identities. The sample included both parents and non-parents, and was predominantly White, educated, middle to upper class, and the majority identified as permanent breadwinners. Using thematic analysis, Meisenbach found six common themes that reflected key experiences of what it means to be a female breadwinner for the participants in her sample: (a) having control, (b) valuing

independence, (c) feeling pressure and worry, (d) valuing partner's contributions, (e) feeling guilt and resentment, and (f) valuing career progress. One interesting finding was the level of enjoyment that many participants described in relation to the theme of control. Meisenbach noted this as a new finding not previously theorized, and though not explicitly stated by participants, speculated that this enjoyment may derive from achieving mobility in the area of relational power. Sample homogeneity was a major limitation, precluding a better understanding of how female breadwinners of more diverse racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds understand their experiences of breadwinning. However, Meisenbach's results generally support the contentions of other work-family researchers who have highlighted the importance of understanding both common and differential experiences of breadwinning women in order to yield strategies to better support working women across individual, family, community, and organizational levels (Collins, 2019; Williams, 2010).

From a communication lens, Medved's (2016) research focused explicitly on the ways that heterosexual breadwinner mothers ($N = 44$) married to stay-at-home fathers discursively constructed their identities as primary earners. Although both members of the couple unit were interviewed as part of a multi-phased research project, discourse analysis for the present inquiry only focused on the interviews with the female participants. Medved's analyses revealed the ways that breadwinning mothers either reproduced, resisted, or challenged dominant discourses of gender relations concerning five aspects of conventional breadwinning discourse: (a) breadwinning as career-primary, (b) breadwinning as obligation, (c) breadwinning suitability and personality, (d) breadwinning as relational power, and (e) breadwinners as ideal workers (p. 237).

Overall, Medved found that breadwinning mothers in her sample *reproduced* discourses of breadwinners as needing to be ideal workers (e.g., continuously available, avoiding family interfering with work at all costs), as well as narratives of gender exceptionalism, meaning that they viewed themselves as having more “male” traits even while resisting discourses viewing men as naturally better suited to the world of work based on essential gendered notions; *resisted* discourses that men should be the primary breadwinners and notions of their breadwinning to mean that they focused foremost on their careers; and *challenged* assumptions that they are better suited as or should be the primary caregiver of children. Also interesting was the finding that breadwinning mothers generally deferred financial control to their husbands, thus perpetuating men’s relational power in the home. Again, a significant limitation was the homogeneity of the sample (e.g., predominantly White, heterosexual, middle-upper class class). Nevertheless, Medved’s findings served to illuminate the specific ways in which some breadwinner mothers both do and “undo gender in their everyday interactions” (p. 249), with practical implications for how individual, couples, and family therapists can better support these women in identifying, addressing, and resolving the ways these issues impact physical, mental, and relational wellness.

Through a series of 42 in-depth interviews of heterosexual married couples with children in which the mother was the primary breadwinner, Chesley (2017) found most notably that, although the mothers described experiences of high pressure and stress due to being the main economic provider akin to those described by breadwinning fathers in other research (Chesley, 2011; Kaufman, 2013), they generally refrained from self-labeling as the family breadwinner. In fact, only 38% of the sample agreed explicitly that

they were the primary family earner, even though all couples met inclusion criteria requiring the wife/mother to earn 80-100% of the family income. Based on couple-level analyses of interviews, Chesley concluded that several factors explained why breadwinner mothers in her sample resisted the primary earner label, including concerns of negative social evaluation as gender role norm violators in relation to their roles as mothers and workers, and as an extension of this, specific concerns that their status would incur negative evaluation of their spouses. Although a significant limitation was the homogeneity of the sample (e.g., White, Midwestern, middle-upper class, heterosexual married couples), these findings largely support other research highlighting the negative evaluation perceived by stay-at-home fathers within a culture that continues to equate breadwinning with constructs of masculinity and fatherhood (Chesley, 2011; Kaufman, 2013; Kramer et al., 2015; Williams, 2010). These findings support earlier research in which men in married dual-earner couple families were still referred to as the breadwinner, regardless of contribution level (Olmstead et al., 2009), and communication research that examined how other-sex couples engaged in discursive construction that continued to frame the husband as the breadwinner following a job loss (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003).

Working Mothers: Navigating Identities and Ideologies

Motherhood is one of many roles that a woman may assume during her lifetime. According to analyses of available U.S. census data at the time of this study, motherhood was described as on the rise (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2018). Although women of all races and ethnicities are delaying motherhood longer than ever before, more women are giving birth and/or raising children than in decades past. The biggest increases have been

seen in women who have never married and women who have postgraduate degrees. Roughly one-quarter of all mothers are single parents, whether by choice or circumstances. Researchers have also described a “baby boom” among bisexual and lesbian women in the last few decades (Hodson et al., 2016; Morris et al, 2002), with census data indicating that 59% of bisexual women are mothers and roughly half of lesbian women are either already mothers (31%) or would like to become a mother (PRC, 2013). Overall, women of childbearing age from most demographic groups are more likely to be mothers than not; however, the experience of motherhood is far from generalizable.

The Construction of Motherhood

Modern motherhood has been described as a social construction brimming with contradictory messaging and pressure around what it means to be a “good” mother (Rice & Else-Quest, 2006). Mothers often experience these pressures as a “matrix of tensions” (Oberman & Josselman, 1996), with those who fall outside socially accepted norms of motherhood (i.e., mothers who are single, divorced, low-income, teenaged, of minority race/ethnic backgrounds, bisexual, lesbian, stepmothers, or noncustodial mothers) typically subject to the highest levels of social criticism (Bemiller, 2005; Delvoye & Tasker, 2016; Hequembourg, 2007; Manoogian et al., 2015; Mulherin & Johnstone, 2015; Rice & Else-Quest, 2006; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Although positive terms are frequently used to characterize the experience of mothering, such as joy, pride, and satisfaction, given the potential for fostering deeply intimate and profound relational connections (Oberman & Josselman, 1996; Senior, 2015), motherhood has also been commonly described as imbued with feelings of ambivalence, guilt, and depression

(Arendell, 1999; Rice & Else-Quest, 2006). Perhaps no writer has more eloquently and poignantly described the paradoxical nature of motherhood than feminist poet and scholar Adrienne Rich.

Frequently characterized as a landmark work of critical significance, Rich's 1986 classic work, *Of Woman Born*, was among the first to richly describe motherhood as both an experience and an institution, with deeply rooted ideological underpinnings canonized throughout history in literature, myth, religion, anthropology, psychological research, and popular culture. As part of her investigation at once both personal and historical, Rich challenged several historically embedded assumptions, including notions of motherhood as a selfless "sacred calling" and an innate "natural" identity. Rich also positioned the inherent paradox of motherhood as an outgrowth of patriarchy, eloquently characterizing this paradox as the singularity of each mother's experiences, but within a patriarchal institutional framework that unites all mothers in their oppression: "Slowly I came to understand the paradox contained in "my" experience of motherhood; that, although different from many other women's experiences it was not unique; and that only in shedding the illusion of my uniqueness could I hope, as a woman, to have any authentic life at all" (Rich, 1986, p. 40).

Rich has certainly not been the only scholar to interrogate personal experiences of motherhood in relationship to culturally embedded assumptions and structural systems of oppression. However, her work has unquestionably been at the forefront in paving the way for feminist researchers and others to more pointedly focus attention to the experiences of mothers themselves in better understanding how intersecting social,

institutional, and ideological factors shape the development of motherhood identities and experiences, including working mothers of various backgrounds and statuses.

Motherhood Identity and Ideologies

For many women, the transition to motherhood involves comprehensive changes in all aspects of their lives, and subsequently comprises a central part of their identity (McMahon, 1995; Thoits, 1992). Scholars (Arendell, 2000; Laney et al., 2015) have lamented that the influence of motherhood on women's identity development remains sorely understudied, especially given the seeming salience of motherhood as an important facet of identity or organizing construct for many women. This includes women who are not mothers, either by choice or for other reasons, because of the ways that dominant essentialist discourses have equated femininity with motherhood (Chodorow, 1978; Rich, 1986).

Although motherhood identity development is not a primary focus of the present inquiry, in brief, the findings of one recent qualitative inquiry indicated that processes of loss (i.e., loss of prior sense of self), role expansion, and intensification of personality were all common components in the development of a motherhood identity (Laney et al., 2015). However, it should be noted that these findings were based on a sample ($N = 30$) that was primarily European American ($n = 24$, 80%) and married ($n = 27$, 90%), though was diverse in terms of education and socioeconomic status. In a separate study, Laney and other colleagues (2014) found that motherhood contributed to women's adult identity development in ways perceived as personally, relationally, generationally, and vocationally expansive, but again the sample lacked demographic diversity due to its predominant focus on highly educated faculty women. Of more critical significance to

the present inquiry, these researchers also argued that development of a motherhood identity is complicated by the constraints of dominant motherhood ideologies prescribing what a ‘good mother’ should look like (Choi et al., 2005; Laney et al., 2015). As a result, mothers must reconcile and integrate lived experiences of motherhood under the domineering gaze of culturally sanctioned motherhood ideals—a process that may be fraught with guilt and self-blame when the mother feels that she is not living up to ever-changing social expectations.

Intensive Mothering Ideologies

Perhaps the most dominant and frequently cited ideology applicable to contemporary motherhood today is what has come to be known as *intensive mothering* (Hays, 1996). Drawing from critiques of psychological theory that have likened motherhood to that of an innate and natural experience in tandem with notions of the “good” or “good enough mother” (Chodorow, 1978), this approach to mothering has been characterized as one that is child-centered, time and labor intensive, fully emotionally absorbing, and frequently expert-guided. It paints a picture of the contemporary mother as self-sacrificing and fully devoted to the needs of her children, usually at the expense of herself. Although several decades have transpired since Hays’ initial conceptualization of intensive mothering, scholars and researchers have concluded that an intensive mothering mandate continues to hold sway today, perhaps even intensifying (Ennis, 2014), and irrespective of mothers’ demographic characteristics (Forbes et al., 2020a). Thus, intensive mothering has been investigated in a variety of ways, including systematic investigations of mass media representations of motherhood (e.g., Auster & Auster-Gussman, 2016; Johnston & Swanson, 2003), quantitative analyses of relationships

between motherhood ideologies and mothers' emotional and mental health (e.g., Christopher, 2012; Henderson et al., 2016; Rizzo et al., 2013), and a wide range of qualitative inquiry grounded in mothers' lived experiences (e.g., Moran, 2014; Walters, 2008).

Several recent studies in the areas of communication and sociology have found support for the prevailing influence of intensive mothering in mass media representations of motherhood (Auster & Auster-Gussman, 2016; Chae, 2015; Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Moore & Abetz, 2016). For example, in their analyses of both print and online Hallmark greeting cards, Auster and Auster-Gussman (2016) found that Mother's Day cards largely reflected themes of nurturance and devotion in relation to the mothering role depicted, whereas Father's Day greeting cards tended to position fathers in an instrumental role, such as supporting achievement, "teaching for the future," and tangible provision (e.g., breadwinning). In their content analyses of women's popular magazines, Johnston and Swanson (2003) found that dominant ideologies of motherhood were largely upheld in that working mothers were infrequently depicted, but when they were, they were largely conveyed as super-moms, whereas at-home mothers were more commonly depicted as being confused and overwhelmed with domestic tasks. Further, at that time of their analyses over 20 years ago, mothers of color were almost entirely excluded. Other research has looked at ways that social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) have facilitated comparison and competition among mothers, such as through careful curation of media feeds that may only shine a light on mothers' successes (while not spotlighting challenges), or through elevation of intensive mothering

philosophies promoted by celebrity mothers and others deemed to be social media influencers (Chae, 2015; Moore & Abetz, 2016).

Quantitative empirical studies have examined relationships between dominant ideologies of motherhood, in particular contemporary intensive mothering ideals, and mothers' emotional and mental health (Henderson et al., 2016; Liss et al., 2013; Rizzo et al., 2013; Schiffrin et al., 2014). Liss et al. (2013) developed a psychological measure, the Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire (IPAQ), that operationalized Hays' construct along five main dimensions (e.g., Essentialism, Fulfillment, Stimulation, Challenging, Child-Centered). They reframed mothering to more inclusively refer to parenting, though the measure continues to account for dominant essentialist attitudes that position mothers as the main parental caregiver. The developers found acceptable to strong validity and reliability for each of the subscales. Rizzo et al. (2013) used the IPAQ measure in a follow-up study with a convenience sample of 181 mothers with at least one child under age 5 for whom these ideologies were hypothesized to be most salient (e.g., predominantly White, middle to upper class mothers). They found that endorsement of intensive parenting beliefs were all predictive of increased stress, depression, and lower life satisfaction, even after controlling for perceived family and support. Among the strongest statistically significant relationships observed was a negative correlation between the Essentialism subscale and the life satisfaction measure, such that higher essentialist beliefs predicted lower life satisfaction, leading the researchers to conclude that endorsement of essentialist beliefs may be especially harmful for women.

Schiffrin and colleagues (2014) also used Liss et al.'s (2013) IPAQ measure to investigate whether parenting expectations of the next generation would be significantly

different by sex using a convenience sample of 322 male and female college students. Most notably, they found that women in their sample more strongly endorsed intensive parenting ideologies than did men in relation to role fulfillment, factors of challenge, and provision of consistent intellectual stimulation for children (as measured by Fulfillment, Stimulation, and Challenging subscales), but not with respect to essentialist or child-centered ideological beliefs related to intensive parenting. They also found that a significantly higher percentage of men indicating that they eventually planned to have children anticipated only minor disruption to their careers (78.83%), whereas a far less number of women (46%) anticipated only minor disruption to their careers. The findings of this study are important, as they point to the generational effect of the intensive mothering/parenting ideologies.

Henderson and colleagues (2016) determined through hierarchical regression analyses that mothers ($N = 283$) who experienced either the pressure to be perfect and/or higher levels of guilt for not meeting parenting expectations experienced decreased psychological wellbeing (e.g., increased stress and anxiety, lower self-efficacy), regardless of stated adherence to intensive mothering ideologies. However, the researchers suggested caution in interpretation given use of only a few researcher created items to test the intensive mothering construct (rather than the IPAQ measure) and homogeneity of sample (e.g., predominantly White, married, heterosexual mothers).

Lastly, numerous qualitative studies have examined the influence of intensive mothering ideology on mothers' lived experiences using a variety of methodologies. This includes single subject autoethnography (Moran, 2015), grounded theory employing use of focus groups (Walters, 2009), and other qualitative approaches examining

relationships between intensive mothering and negative mental health outcomes with respect to mothers generally (Sutherland, 2010; Tummala-Narra, 2009) and in specific relation to the experiences of working mothers (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Forbes et al., 2020b; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Lamar & Forbes, 2020). The latter mentioned studies investigating ideologies specific to working mothers will be more fully discussed in the next section; however, the overarching findings of these qualitative investigations make clear the ways that intensive mothering ideologies continue to shape mothers' daily experiences, whether in relation to development of maternal gatekeeping practices (Moran, 2015), generating feelings of deep entrenchment impacting mothers' sense of self and agency in the world (Walters, 2009), or resultant feelings of constant burden, stress, and guilt (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Forbes et al., 2020b; Sutherland, 2010; Tummala-Narra, 2009).

Collectively, research findings related to intensive mothering ideology seem to point to its continuing pervasiveness in the lives of contemporary mothers generally, including both working and nonworking mothers, as well as suggest that it has already made its mark on the next generation of parents, including both mothers *and* fathers. At the same time, a clear limitation of the majority of these studies is lack of demographic diversity. Therefore, based on these studies alone, the extent to which intensive mothering ideology may be relevant for mothers of other backgrounds is unclear. As previously discussed, feminist scholars and researchers have expounded the role of social location in how women from different backgrounds experience and navigate the intersections of work and motherhood (Collins, 2009; Coontz, 1997). Thus, alternative

motherhood ideologies that take into account social location for mothers of several particular social groups will be discussed next.

Alternative Motherhood Ideologies

In critiquing intensive mothering as mainly applicable to White and heterosexual working mothers based on a limited sample on only 38 working class and professional mothers, researchers have pushed back by explicating alternative motherhood ideologies that more closely describe the experiences of various groups of marginalized (m)others, such as Black and African American mothers (e.g., Dow; 2016), mothers belonging to the LGBTQ+ community (Suter et al., 2015), and rural low-income working mothers (Manoogian et al., 2015).

For Black and African American mothers in the United States, as reviewed by numerous Black feminist scholars and critical race theorists (Barnes, 2016; Collins, 2009; Coontz, 1997; hooks, 1984; Rousseau, 2013), working motherhood has long been the norm—since slavery through emancipation, reconstruction, Jim Crow, and up until the present—given economic need and systems of discrimination and oppression enforced through governmental policy. This has led to pejorative depictions of Black women in visual arts, literature, and other cultural imagery as ‘mammies,’ as well as schemas of the strong matriarch as both the breadwinner and the caregiver for nuclear and extended family, as well as within her community (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Other scholars described this as akin to Strong Black Woman syndrome, or the superwoman race-gender schema that prescribes expectations for Black women in relation to caregiving, self-reliance, perseverance, emotional resilience, and other areas (e.g., Woods-Giscombé, 2010), often with severe consequences for Black women’s mental health (e.g., Liao et al., 2019).

Rousseau (2013) contended that contemporary media continues to play a prominent role in shaping negative social rhetoric about Black mothers, which in turn, has served to support the continuing oppression of the Black community by eliciting social support for unjust economic and welfare policies. Her systematic analysis of representations of Black women in popular films from 1990-2010s found that portrayals of Black mothers could be separated into three primary negative social rhetoric motifs: (1) surviving bad Black mothers, (2) desperate Black mothers, or (3) absent/silent Black mothers.

In relation to hegemonic ideologies of motherhood, Dow (2016) argued that Black women's social position "primarily as productive and reproductive commodities" (p. 183) has largely excluded them from practices related to intensive mothering ideologies. Although Black mothers are by no means a monolithic group and have varied experiences due to factors of education and other identities (Barnes, 2016; Moore, 2011), common experiences of oppression have led to key differences in values, beliefs, and attitudes among Black mothers in contrast to White mothers in the United States, leading to construction of alternative motherhood ideologies to which many Black and African American women feel accountable (Dow, 2016). Based on qualitative analyses of interviews with 24 middle to upper-class Black and African American identified mothers employed in professional occupations, Dow found that participants perceived three dominant cultural expectations for Black mothers: (1) economic self-reliance, (2) working outside the home as the default, and (3) utilization of family, kin, and community networks for childcare. Dow characterized this as an ideology of *integrated motherhood*, highlighting the ways that systems of oppression in the United States (e.g., disproportionate incarceration of Black men, lack of access to quality childcare in their

communities) may have contributed to the construction of Black motherhood as synonymous with breadwinning and a much higher utilization of family and kin for childcare. Corroborating the core tenets of an integrated motherhood ideology for Black women, Blair-Loy and DeHart (2003) and Barnes (2016) have both documented the perception of significant pushback that Black career women perceived from family and within their communities when they either considered or ultimately left their careers to become stay-at-home mothers.

With respect to LGBTQ+ mothers, Suter et al.'s (2015) relational dialectical inquiry examined the ideological terrain perpetuated by competing discourses experienced by female-female co-mothers. The sample consisted of 44 lesbian, bisexual, or gender fluid co-mothers who were invited to participate in focus group discussions about their experiences of co-motherhood. Discourse analytic methods illuminated discursive constructions of female-female co-motherhood as a "polemic struggle" between two ideologically driven discourses: a dominant discourse of essential motherhood (DEM) and the discourse of queer motherhood (DQM) that countered it. A dominant discourse of essential motherhood reifies the mainstream ideological view of motherhood as monomaternial (i.e., only one mother), tied to a father figure, and is inherently biological in order to be considered moral and legitimate. In contrast, a discourse of queer motherhood interrupts monomaternialism through a model of polymaternialism, destabilizes the notion of a family patriarch, and problematizes the concept of moral biological motherhood. In navigating the competing discourses, Suter et al. noted that the majority of co-mothers used methods of discursive negation to resist DEM ideologies in order to more fully embrace DQM ideology, while some appeared to

integrate aspects of both the DEM and the DQM in constructing personal meanings of motherhood. Interestingly, they also noticed that discursive constructions of DQM in relation to the denaturalization of biology appeared to draw from discourses of intensive mothering in that participants characterized authentic motherhood as a matter of self-less effort, rather than biology.

Lastly, Manoogian and colleagues (2015) also challenged the applicability of intensive motherhood ideologies as understood within more privileged contexts in their study of parenting expectations among low-income, rural mothers ($N = 57$) living in the Appalachians. Noting the distinct challenges for working mothers and families in rural areas in particular (e.g., persistent economic distress; lack of quality education, childcare, transportation, technology, social services), Manoogian et al. found that intensive mothering for these mothers often meant tangible acts of self-sacrifice that centered their children's needs, but in contrast to more economically privileged mothers, was often done with the specific purpose of shielding their children from awareness of their poverty. For example, mothers in their sample described reducing their own meals so that their children would not experience hunger or shorting bills so that essential items for children could still be purchased. Thus, the researchers found that intensive mothering ideologies were still present, but differed markedly from that of more privileged and educated mothers due to significant geographic and economic constraints.

Overall, these and other scholars have effectively highlighted that, though marginalized (m)others may not be responsive to mainstream intensive mothering ideals, they are still frequently held accountable to constructions of motherhood that hold sway

within their own social group, such as has been described with respect to Black and African American mothers, LGBTQ+ mothers, and low-income working mothers.

Working Mother Ideologies: Navigating Conflicting Expectations and Tensions

As discussed in the first section of this literature review, individuals of all gender identifications (binary and non-binary identified) remain largely bound by ideology and organizational policies that continue to regard men as primary economic providers, despite evidence that for households headed by two other-sex adults this model is no longer the norm. This, in turn, perpetuates a gendered view of the ‘ideal worker’ as male (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Gatrell & Cooper, 2016). Moreover, feminist scholars and others (Acker; 1990; Hennekam et al., 2017) have argued that, though organizations may present as gender neutral, their policies and practices reinforce a view of the ideal worker as disembodied from sexuality and unencumbered by procreative activities, and consequently gender becomes concretized within its very structure.

Further, expectations for the ‘ideal worker’ are often interlaced with principles of capitalism and competition that perpetuate “intensified workplace cultures” (Gatrell & Cooper, 2016, p. 136) and reward prioritization of one’s worker role. Conformity to ideal worker expectations is frequently evidenced by long hours, steadfast devotion, and increasingly with innovations in mobile technology, being constant available and connected (Chesley, 2006; Williams, 2000). As reviewed, this has led to a wide range of structural and systematic disadvantages for women and mothers in the workplace, frequently causing them to feel unsupported and undervalued in their roles as workers (Collins, 2019), as well as may significantly impact how they feel about themselves as mothers and various areas of wellbeing.

Several researchers have sought to probe whether working mothers prioritized their mother role or their worker role (Giele, 2008; Grady & McCarthy, 2008). In her qualitative inquiry informed by a life course approach to understanding variations in gender roles, Giele (2008) found that in a sample of 48 married, college-educated women balanced by race (e.g., White and African American) and status as either stay-at-home mothers or working mothers, those who were working mothers shared in common the tendency to organize their life stories with work as the central theme. For these women, motherhood was not the dominant identity, but instead was described as an additive aspect of their identity that served to more fully enrich their lives. This contrasted markedly from stay-at-home mothers who organized their life stories with motherhood as the central identity, describing patterns of behavior and action that aligned with the dominant contemporary ideology of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996). This also held true with Black mothers, but these mothers were acutely aware of how, by doing so, they went against dominant ideologies of Black motherhood in which mothers are expected to integrate both work and mothering (Coontz, 1997; Giele, 2008). Grady and McCarthy's (2008) professional working mothers ($N = 18$) from dual-income households in Ireland generally described their motherhood role as their number one priority, but focused on the ways that meaningful work through their careers was integral to their success in both roles, as well as in achieving a more satisfactory quality of life overall.

Other qualitative research has more closely examined how working mothers experience and navigate conflicting tensions between hegemonic motherhood ideologies and ideal worker ideologies, including focus to the impact on their construction of working motherhood identity (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Christopher, 2012; Lamar &

Forbes, 2020; Turner & Norwood, 2013), as well as the various metaphors and strategies utilized to understand and manage these tensions (Cheung & Liu, 2014; Forbes et al., 2020b; Johnston & Swanson, 2007; Wattis & James, 2013; Vair, 2013). Buzzanell et al. (2005) found that predominantly White, married, working mothers ($N = 11$) in managerial positions navigated these tensions after returning to work post-maternity leave by reframing good mothering in terms of a *good working mother* image. For these women, the hallmarks of a good working mother involved arranging quality child care, allocating tasks to one's partner, and taking pleasure in their working mother role. However, the researchers remarked on the strong overtones of ambivalence and conflict that accompanied each of these areas for the women in the sample, noting that the good working mother identity construction might be interpreted as both fragile and ironic.

In their analyses of professional working women of a similar demographic background (e.g., White, educated, married), Turner and Norwood (2013) found that working mothers who navigated breastfeeding in the workplace frequently danced between practices of *bounded* and *unbounded motherhood* towards embodiment of a good working mother identity. Bounded motherhood in the workplace consisted of efforts to constrain or conceal breastfeeding practices so as to divert attention from the maternal role and maintain an ideal worker image, thereby preserving and upholding male gendered organizational norms, whereas unbounded motherhood practices were far less frequently practiced (e.g., breastfeeding in meetings, not concealing the sound of pumping), as they disrupted the temporal and spatial order. However, some mothers perceived unbounded motherhood practices as a site of resistance against the status quo

and conceptualized them into their own personalized definitions of a good working mother identity.

Christopher (2012) entered the term *extensive mothering* into the lexicon to describe how employed working mothers ($N = 40$) of diverse racial, socioeconomic, and relational statuses navigated both ideal worker and intensive mothering ideologies through delegation of childcare and reframing good mothering as being in charge. Her sample included both single and married mothers, and was over half women of color. Christopher noted that single mothers' accounts of extensive mothering differed in substantial ways from married mothers. In particular, she found that, single mothers were more likely to view working as a matter of economic necessity, in addition to being an important way of fulfilling the role of good mother. However, Christopher noted that all mothers in the sample, including single mothers, described working for personal reasons that went beyond just economic gain (e.g., personal fulfillment, role modeling of gender equality, relational power, to have breaks from kids), and that were perceived as integral to what it meant to be a 'good mother.' Thus, extensive mothering involved rejection of a central tenet of intensive mothering ideology (i.e., mother as self-sacrificial to her children's needs) in favor of more focus to the mother herself, but with recognition to the relational effects that a self-focus would still have on others. Christopher also noted that many of the mothers in her sample attempted to push back on ideal worker norms prescribing long hours and family sacrifice, as well as refused to center one role as more important than other, focusing instead on the ways that the two integrated to make them more effective in both domains.

Using a phenomenological approach informed by a feminist lens, Forbes and colleagues (2020b) examined the impact of intensive mothering expectations on the personal lives of 15 working mothers, all of whom except one were in heterosexual marriages to full-time employed husbands. They summarized their core thematic findings (e.g., discrepancy between personal experiences of motherhood and “ideal” motherhood; motherhood lends to role overload) as evidence of what they termed the *inexorable motherhood situation*, defined as “an inescapable and often invisible trap” (p. 17). They explained that, as a manifestation of intensive mothering ideology, the inexorable motherhood situation results in a double bind in which attempts made to achieve unrealistic standards in order to be a “good mother” results in being overloaded and depleted, and therefore less likely to achieve such standards.

In a related phenomenological inquiry using the same participants, Lamar and Forbes (2020) focused specifically on the impact of intensive mothering ideology on participants’ career lives, with core findings highlighting the difficulties of decision-making and motivation related to work, challenges of finding quality childcare, lack of role models for working mothers, and working mothers’ perceptions of being seen as incompetent in their careers due to managing multiple roles. In both studies, the researchers paid special attention to how their findings might help counselor educators and practitioners more effectively support the needs of working mothers in counseling, including maintaining awareness of therapist biases given the pervasiveness of gender bias in the culture at large, helping to connect working mothers with role models and mentors, and conducting further counseling research and scholarship to better understand and advocate for the needs of working mothers.

Finally, a number of researchers have placed primary focus on understanding the various strategies and metaphors that working mothers have employed when navigating tensions and conflicts between ideologies of motherhood and ideal worker ideologies (Cheung & Liu, 2014; Johnston & Swanson, 2007; Wattis & James, 2013; Vair, 2013). Swanson and Johnston's (2007) dialectical inquiry examining the experiences of both employed and stay-at-home mothers ($N = 98$) described working mothers' navigation of conflicting ideologies as a form of "cognitive acrobatics," frequently resulting in significant stress and internal conflict, whereas at-home mothers more easily embraced intensive mothering ideology, and therefore experienced less conflict. Working mothers have also been described as employing strategies of 'weaving' to manage tensions related to conflicting ideologies (Cheng & Liu, 2014), noted to be increasingly common for working mothers in professional occupations where spatial boundaries between home life and workplace may be permeable (e.g., remote working). Others have found discourses of 'balancing' to be prominently employed by working mothers in how they frame and conceptualize their toggle of responsibilities (Wattis & James, 2013; Vair, 2013). Yet, Vair contended that the very notion of balance is just another ideology that, in foregrounding individual responsibility to effectively balance within inherently unequal and gendered organizational structures, continues to tether working mothers within cycles of self-blame and guilt when they perceive themselves as balancing ineffectively.

Thus, as theory and research reviewed in this section suggests, the onus appears to be largely on the individual working mother to find ways to navigate these conflicting tensions—whether via extensive mothering, unbounded motherhood, weaving, or other strategies that insinuate either acquiescence or resistance— given the embedded nature of

gendered policies that disadvantage working mothers and embedment of gender within the very structure of the workplace (Acker; 1990; Hennekam et al., 2017)

Theoretical Frameworks

'Doing' and 'Undoing' gender theories

As an extension of social constructionist understandings of gender, West and Zimmerman (1987, 2009) entered the term “doing gender” into the scholarly literature as a theoretical framework that conceptualizes gender as something that is constructed and accomplished by individuals within everyday social interactions. West and Zimmerman defined gender as “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (1987, p. 169). In other words, gender is viewed not as a trait, property, or role that individuals possess, rather a dynamic and fluid behavior accomplished through the daily routine of social interaction that changes over time in response to contemporary norms (1987, 2009).

West and Zimmerman contended that the differentiation of *gender* from conventional understandings of *sex* (socially agreed upon binary classification of individuals as either male or female based on biological criteria) and *sex category* (categorical placement of individuals based on sex classification) is important to understand given the unavoidability of “doing gender” within a social context that holds individuals accountable to rigid sex role categorization and socialization processes. Thus, whereas sex categorization involves recognition of an individual based on socially regulated placement to a static category (a “being”), gender involves ongoing negotiated interactions (a “doing”) for which individuals are held socially accountable in relation to current and evolving cultural prescriptions for what is viewed as acceptable masculinity

or femininity based on prevailing binary sex categories (West & Zimmerman, 2009, p. 114). In this way, gender can be understood as more than a way that someone identifies or behaves, rather also “a powerful ideological device, which produces, reproduces, and legitimates the choices and limits that are predicated on sex category” (1987, p. 187).

In explicating their theory, West and Zimmerman advocate for moving beyond understandings of gender as either a *role* or a *display*. The notion of gender as a *role* is critiqued as serving to obfuscate the everyday dynamic processes involved in doing gender. Conceptualizations of *gender display*, or performance, are critiqued as implying a view of gender that is imbedded within an individual and then externalized, as well as stemming from essentialist assumptions of masculinity and femininity, as per original definitions of the term proffered by Goffman (1976, as cited by West & Zimmerman, 1987),

Other scholars have contended that, if “doing gender” involves an active and fluid process of situational and interactional behavioral negotiation, then movement towards “undoing gender” is also possible (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009). Both Deutsch and Risman acknowledge the seminal contribution of the “doing gender” framework as having provided a new language for understanding gender as something that is continuously constructed and re-constructed in response to changing cultural norms, and through this, has played a key role in changing the structure of gender itself. Building on Butler (2004), they also convincingly make the case that if gender can be constructed, it can also be deconstructed, as well as point out that research inquiries utilizing a “doing gender” framework have tended to reinforce a view of gender inequities as persistent and inevitable, albeit perhaps unintentionally. Deutsch suggests

that, for purposes of clarity in research inquiry and in general, “doing gender” should characterize interactions that serve to reproduce gender difference, whereas “undoing gender” should be used to refer to those interactions that reduce gender difference. Wrote Deutsch (2007), “My plea is that we shift our inquiry about ongoing social interactions to focus on change. Although I do not have the answers, I believe we should change the questions” (p. 114).

Accordingly, Deutsch suggests that gender-focused research inquiries might produce fruitful questions relative to five main areas towards the ultimate goal of change: (a) the contexts in which social interactions might become less gendered, (b) gender irrelevance, meaning exploration of the contexts in which people may *not* be held accountable to gender, such as due to superseding salience of other intersecting identity characteristics, (c) whether gendered interactions always result in inequality, (d) micro and macro-levels of gender relations (i.e., investigating relationships between interactional and structural levels of gender in effecting actual equity and egalitarianism in households, with attention to intersections of race and class), and (e) the conditions under which resistant or subversive gendered interactions influence socially normative understandings of gender, as well as propel institutional change.

As will be discussed in the next sections of the literature review, much of the research examining inequities experienced by working mothers (i.e., examinations of inequitable divisions in childrearing and household labor) has used “doing gender” theory as an analytic tool for understanding the role of daily interactions in perpetuating gendered behaviors (e.g., Latshaw & Hale, 2016, Pinho & Gaunt, 2019), and in turn, the perpetuation of gendered norms, discourses, and institutional structures (West &

Zimmerman, 2009). At the same time, other scholars have found evidence that many working mothers, including breadwinning mothers and others from diverse backgrounds, have found ways to challenge, resist, and subvert hegemonic ideologies pertaining to their work-life integration (e.g. Christopher, 2012; Turner & Norwood, 2013), which may conceivably be viewed as making strides towards “undoing gender.”

Thus, application of “doing” and “undoing gender” theories to the present inquiry in conjunction with the core methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009) provided a framework for investigating individual differences in how breadwinning mothers navigated and made meaning of the intersection between their worker and mother roles during the pandemic, especially given dominant gendered constructions of the ideal worker and the domestic arena. Relatedly, a component of interest for the present inquiry was the extent to which participants’ experiences during the pandemic either conformed (hence “doing gender”) or resisted dominant gendered constructions and ideologies (thus making movement towards “undoing gender”), and the meaning making resulting from these experiences.

Intersectionality

A term first coined by American lawyer and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), *intersectionality* is an analytic tool for understanding the relative experiences of power, privilege, and oppression that people navigate due to belonging to multiple social group categories in relation to their social, political, and cultural contexts (Cole, 2009; Weber, 2001). Thus, intersectionality promotes a view of human difference that is not simplistic, binary, or essentialist, but rather holds as central the notion that each person experiences multiple subjectivities simultaneously along intersecting axes of

personal and cultural identity, each influencing and impacting the other (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2). Individual and cultural identity variables can be both visible and invisible, and include race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, physical/psychological ability/disability, religion/spirituality, age, and other areas (Hays, 2016).

When used as a form of qualitative inquiry, adoption of an intersectional lens means paying attention to heterogeneity of experiences due to social location, even while searching for common aspects of experience (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Goodwin et al., 2019). This is congruent with core tenets of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which similarly emphasize knowledge creation through in-depth, particularistic, and idiographic means (Smith, 2009). For the purposes of the present study, application of an intersectional lens in conjunction with IPA methodology meant heeding attention to the heterogeneity of breadwinner mothers' experiences given differences in race, class, relational status, and other factors. Intersectionality and IPA also share in common the core principle of researcher self-reflexivity (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Smith, 2009). For the context of the present study, this meant continual reflection to my own intersecting personal and social identity variables due to sharing in common with participants the experience of also being a breadwinning mother during the pandemic.

Work-Life Integration: Benefits and Challenges for Working Mothers

Work-life integration, also referred to as *work-life balance*, has been defined as a process of reconciling the time demands of work, family, and individual needs, and is predicated on the belief that enjoyment in all these domains are important for leading a fulfilling life (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Some scholars have noted that the very concept

of balancing personal and professional/work spheres did not enter the scholarly literature in a meaningful way until those who were formerly homemakers (e.g., White, middle-class women and mothers) began entering the workforce in greater numbers in the latter half of the 20th century (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Edwards, 2001; Goldin & Mitchell, 2017). Moreover, the increasing ubiquity of the term may also speak to the broader inherent devaluation of unpaid domestic labor and childrearing that has long been the domain of women from all backgrounds under systems of patriarchy (hooks, 1984; Rich, 1986).

In general, research inquiry in the area of work-family integration can be divided into two contrasting areas of investigation: (1) research examining both the positive and negative impacts that one domain can have on the other due to “spill-over” of each domain into the other, also referred to as *work-family spill-over*, or work-family *facilitation* research (e.g., Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Grzywacz & Carlson, 2000); and (2) research that has focused mainly on the negative implications of conflict that results from the intersection of the two domains, or what is known as *work-family conflict* focused research (e.g., Amstad et al., 2011; Cardenas et al., 2004; Frone et al., 1997). Within the next sections, I overview the general findings of relevant research pertaining to both positive and negative effects of working motherhood based on these concepts in areas of personal, social, and mental health. Given the focus of this research study, this includes a more in-depth review of challenges to optimal work-life integration, including theory and research pertaining to work-family conflict, gendered divisions in domestic sphere labor, and recent empirical research documenting the negative impacts of work-family challenges on working mothers’ physical and mental health.

Positive Impacts of Work-Life Integration

Given structural and ideological challenges that women often experience when combining work with motherhood, achieving an ideal integration between the two spheres may feel like a tenuous hill to climb, though many do climb it and perceive many benefits along the way. A number of studies have documented benefits of combining a career or paid work with motherhood, such as in areas of self-esteem and identity development (Reid & Hardy, 1999), spiritual wellbeing (Hall et al., 2012; Oates et al., 2008), relational and mental health (Damaske et al., 2014; Furdyna et al., 2008; Schnittker, 2007), and parenting skills with positive impacts to children's mental health (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003; Strazdins et al., 2013), providing evidence for positive spillover and role enrichment theories (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Thus, these and other studies support the view that mothers who engage in multiple roles (i.e. mother, wife, worker) experience higher overall levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction because of positive gains from one or more roles enhancing their performance in one or more of the other roles.

Work-family researchers have also found positive relationships between working mothers' perceived role quality, the number of roles they perform (e.g. role set density), and various measures of personal wellbeing and satisfaction (e.g., Carlson et al., 2006; Glynn et al., 2009), while others have shown that a combination of role quality, resources, and other factors may all be important in buffering negative effects of work-family conflict and subjective distress (Haggag et al., 2012; Kulik & Liberman, 2013). For example, in a study of working mothers ($N = 148$) of children under the ages of 10, perceived role quality was found to moderate relationships between work-family conflict and self-reported depressive symptoms (Haggag et al., 2012). In Kulik and Liberman's

(2013) study of 227 Israeli working mothers, greater role set density was associated with less work-related distress, although family-related distress was not impacted. In a sample of professional working mothers ($N = 200$) with at least one child under age 18, Hall et al. (2012) found that higher sanctification of work, defined as when work was perceived as a *calling*, yielded both higher job satisfaction and positive mental health benefits. Other studies have demonstrated the important role that factors of social support from work and family, levels of personal self-efficacy, and role satisfaction can all play in decreasing working mothers' subjective experiences of work-family conflict and distress (Erdwins et al., 2001; Kulik & Liberman, 2013).

Lastly, in comparing mothers who worked full-time with those employed part-time, Roxburgh (2005) demonstrated that, while full-time employed married mothers ($n = 194$) with full-time employed spouses were significantly more distressed than their counterparts (full-time employed fathers with full-time employed wives, $n = 132$), these mothers were significantly *less* distressed than part-time employed mothers married to full-time employed spouses. Roxburgh contended that her findings provide evidence in support of the cost-of-caring hypothesis (i.e., that mothers experience greater strains due to higher caregiving burdens), but arguably also support a view that mothers benefit from engaging in paid work outside the home, as per the central tenets of role expansion theory (Barnett et al., 2018).

A significant limitation of many of these studies pertains to lack of sample diversity characteristics in areas of race, class, education, and relational statuses. Relatively few researchers have made mothers of color or those who hold other marginalized identity statuses central when investigating the positive benefits—whether

physical, mental, relational, or in other ways—when combining a career (or paid employment outside the home) with motherhood (Hanna, 2010; Kachchaf et al., 2015). Consequently, further research that focuses on the experiences of mothers from more diverse backgrounds and statuses is still needed to better understand the positive gains perceived by all types of mothers when combining work with motherhood towards achievement of optimal work-life integration.

Negative Impacts and Challenges to Work-Life Integration

Researchers examining negative impacts in the area of work-life balance have been largely based on theories of *work-family conflict*, defined as a type of inter-role tension that results when the demands of one domain are experienced as incompatible with the demands of the other (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Work-family conflict has been conceptualized as typically either time, strain, or behavior based (Frone et al., 1997), and as occurring bidirectionally, via either work interference with family (WIF) or family interference with work (FIW; Carlson & Frone, 2003). Several studies have found that working women reported feeling significantly more distracted by work intrusions at home (WIF) than the reverse (FIW), suggesting that family boundaries tend to be more permeable than work boundaries, and leading to higher subjective feelings of role overload, diminished role quality, and lower job satisfaction (Cardenas et al., 2004; Eagle et al., 1997). With implications for the present inquiry, another area examined with increasing frequency that causes many working mothers considerable work-family conflict pertains to gendered divisions in unpaid domestic labor, also commonly referred to as the “second shift” (Hoschild, 1989, 2012).

The Second Shift: Gendered Divisions in Childcare & Household Labor

Hoschild (1989, 2012) coined the term, “*the second shift*,” to refer to the well documented reality of gendered divisions in unpaid household labor and childcare. Studies have consistently demonstrated the overall pattern of working mothers completing more hours of unpaid work than working fathers in two-parent other-sex households (Bianchi et al., 2012; Horne et al., 2018; Negraia et al., 2018; Raley et al., 2012), although variation exists when examining by factors of work days vs. non-work days, types of household labor, and percentage of household income each member of a couple makes (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Doucet, 2006; Schneider, 2011).

Based on gender deviation compensation theory, several researchers have found that hours of unpaid housework for married women actually increased in proportion to higher earnings and/or when their spouse was unemployed (Bittman et al., 2003; Mannino & Deutsch, 2007; Schneider, 2011). For example, Schneider’s (2011) analysis of American Time Use Survey (ATUS) data from 2003-2007 ($n = 11,868$ married women; $n = 10,770$ married men) found a curvilinear relationship between women’s earnings and their time doing housework. In other words, as married women increased their earnings towards equality with their husbands, their amount of housework decreased; however, as women out-earned their husbands, their time spent doing housework increased. Schneider concluded that these findings support the notion that housework may be a way that women “do gender,” possibly as a way of compensating for their gender role deviance or to avoid marital conflict with their spouses.

Other researchers have pointed to increased equity in allocation of housework and childcare labor in households with role-reversed couples, especially in the rising number of families where men are stay-at-home fathers by choice (Kramer et al., 2015; Pinho &

Gaunt, 2019). For example, Pinho and Gaunt's (2019) comparison of female breadwinner/male caregiver couples to male breadwinner/female caregiver couples in the United Kingdom ($N= 236$; couple unit of analysis) found that allocation of unpaid labor was more equitably distributed in households with a female breadwinner. In support of other researchers who have also found movement towards more egalitarian divisions of unpaid labor (e.g., Cotter et al., 2011), the researchers contended that role-reversed couples appear to be making strides towards "undoing gender" by completing tasks in accordance with family role instead of socially prescriptive gender roles.

Given finite resources of time and based on theories of gender performativity (Butler, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009), both Chesley and Flood (2017) and Latshaw and Hale (2016) found that atypical gender family arrangements resulted in stay-at-home fathers doing a more significant share of housework and childcare on average, but breadwinner moms were still found to significantly "step up" after coming home from work and on their non-work days, more so than either breadwinning fathers or stay-at-home fathers. Latshaw and Hale (2016) also noted that stay-at-home fathers spent more time engaging in leisure activities than did breadwinning mothers.

Corroborating earlier research findings related to gender differences in types of housework completed (Doucet, 2006), Chesley (2017) also found that breadwinning mothers continued to perform a large share of routine housework, also termed female-typical housework (e.g., dishes, laundry), but when economic resources were sufficient, were more likely to outsource housework than childcare. In fact, Chesley found an inverse relationship between a breadwinner mother's education levels and the likelihood of using third-party childcare resources. This supports observations regarding trends in

childrearing overall in that time spent with children has gone up across the board for both mothers and fathers given the emotional investment component involved in raising children (Bianchi et al., 2012; Raley et al., 2012), but more so for mothers given intensive mothering ideals (Hays, 1996). Additionally, work-family researchers have also keenly observed that, even when families have the means to outsource some unpaid labor tasks (e.g., housework, childcare), the task of organizing and managing these tasks, as well as many other unseen household activities and the overall family routine, is usually assumed by the mother, indicating that mothers remain ultimately responsible for the executive management of the domestic sphere (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Doucet, 2006; Hodkinson & Brooks, 2018).

It should be noted that most studies examining allocation of unpaid labor have focused on heterosexual married couples because of pervasive sex role stereotypes. However, as reviewed by Williams (2010), although some researchers have found egalitarian patterns of housework and childcare in same-sex two-parent headed households (especially lesbian couples), others have found that unequal divisions of labor may still fall along butch/femme relational role lines with respect to both gay male parent couples and some lesbian parent couples (see Carrington, 1999 or Mock & Cornelius, 2003). These studies suggest that egalitarianism when it comes to the division of household labor and childcare—a well-documented phenomenon when it comes to two-parent other-sex households—may not be as widespread as assumed among same-sex headed households. Further, the notion of a “second shift” means something altogether different for single working mothers who must frequently manage everything on their own, as well as are less likely to outsource less desirable unpaid labor (e.g. household

cleaning) due to economic constraints than are breadwinner mothers in two-parent households (Barnett et al., 2018).

Psychological, Relational, and Physical Impacts

Work-family researchers have shown that, for many working mothers, challenges related to work-life balance due to the “second shift” phenomenon and other factors may cause considerable role strain and overload (Cardenas et al., 2004; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019), which can contribute to a wide range of negative psychological, relational, and physical consequences. These include increased anxiety and psychological distress (Amstad et al., 2011; Haggag et al., 2012; Harryson et al., 2012; O’Brien et al., 2014), lower relational and job satisfaction (Zhao et al., 2020), poor cardiovascular health (Thurston et al., 2011), and negative sleep outcomes (Crain et al., 2014; Lalukka et al., 2010; McQuillan et al., 2019).

Further, although working mothers do experience many positive benefits when functioning in multiple roles and domains as previously reviewed, researchers have found that these benefits diminish when factors of over-employment (e.g., overload of work hours), relationship status, and gendered divisions of unpaid labor and childcare are all taken into account (see Kramer & Pak, 2018 for further review). Kramer and Pak (2018) hypothesized that these mixed findings may be partially explainable by the degree to which working women adhere to traditional gender ideology. In their large-scale longitudinal study examining relationships between relative income and depressive symptoms in working adults from two-parent other-sex households, the researchers found that women’s levels of depression increased in proportion to higher earnings, whereas the inverse effect occurred for men. This finding remained true after controlling for known

predictors of depression (e.g., net income below the national poverty level). They also found that gender ideology moderated this relationship for working mothers, but not for working fathers, speculating that working mothers who hold more gender egalitarian ideals may feel more comfortable performing gender in ways that violate hegemonic constructions of gender and motherhood.

For many working and breadwinning mothers, work-life conflict may also contribute to or exacerbate interpersonal relational conflict and stress, particularly within their own households with spouses or live-in partners (Barnett et al., 2008; Bertrand et al., 2013; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019), as well as with their children. For example, Ciciolla and Luthar (2019) found that working mothers ($N = 393$) who felt disproportionately responsible for both the physical and the ‘invisible’ emotional labor in the home (e.g., overseeing household routines, ensuring children’s physical and emotional wellbeing) exhibited lower levels of relationship and marital satisfaction, life satisfaction, and higher feelings of emptiness. Although not focused exclusively on mothers, Bertrand et al. (2013) found that women’s relative earnings in relation to their husbands was a significant factor in increasing work-family conflict, with findings indicating that higher earning women had lower levels of relational satisfaction and were more likely to divorce. In another study focusing on working mothers of school-aged children in dual-earner families, Barnett and colleagues (2008) found that specific work variables (e.g., evening work shift, number of work hours) were significant factors in predicting lower levels of marital role quality and higher levels of psychological distress for both partners in the relationship. With respect to working mothers and their children, although the overall positive impact of mothers’ work-family integration has been documented with

respect to improved parenting skills, parent-child relationships, and children's developmental outcomes (Freese et al., 2016; Gerson, 2010), other research has shown significant relationships between maternal work-family factors, inter-parental conflict, parent-child relational conflict, and child mental health problems (Strazdins et al., 2013; Vieira et al., 2016; Vahedi et al., 2019). For example, in examining longitudinal relationships between children's behavioral issues and maternal work-family conflict, Vahedi and colleagues found that inter-parental conflict was a significant mediator, suggesting a complex relationship between work-family conflict, inter-parental conflict, and the mental health of children and families.

It has been noted that much of the research on the negative impacts of work-family issues for working mothers has used mainly samples of White, professional women in dual-earner heterosexual marriages (Barnett et al., 2018), including many of the aforementioned studies. Consequently, researchers have increasingly sought to analyze the negative impacts of work-family conflict for working mothers of more diverse backgrounds, affirming relationships between role overload and negative mental health symptoms for low-income unmarried working mothers (Ciabattari, 2009; Son & Bauer, 2010), Black career women (Kachchaf et al., 2015), and other marginalized mothers (e.g., noncustodial, divorced, teenaged; Bemiller, 2010; Mulherin & Johnstone, 2015). However, more research is needed that expressly takes into account the intersecting identity variables of working mothers when examining their experiences of work-family conflict, especially among those who identify as breadwinning mothers.

Impact of Technology and Remote Working on Work-Life Integration

Given the precipitous incline in digital and virtual technologies over the last several decades, a growing number of researchers have focused on both the positive and negative impacts of these on work-life balance (Harrington & Ladge, 2009; Lott & Abendroth, 2020; Sullivan & Smithson, 2007; van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020). For workers in some industries, technological advances have enabled them to have more flexibility in how they combine work and family life, such as through remote working (also referred to as telework), and should theoretically promote better work-life integration (Lott & Abendroth, 2020). Yet, there is increasing evidence that working from home, particularly for women, leads to more work-family conflict than it reduces (see van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020) and results in prioritization of the worker role and a tendency to over-work (Sullivan & Smithson, 2007). Further, with respect to working mothers, who on average are more likely to work in industries where telework is feasible than are men, taking advantage of telework in industries with pronounced ideal worker cultures is often perceived as disadvantageous professionally, and often exacerbates gendered divisions of unpaid household labor and childcare (Lott & Abendroth, 2020). Yet, as was the case for huge numbers of non-essential workers throughout the United States and globally during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, remote working from home became the norm for many working mothers who did not otherwise become temporarily or permanently unemployed.

The COVID-19 Pandemic: Working Mothers of School-Aged Children

In March of 2020, the World Health Organization declared outbreaks of the novel Coronavirus that first appeared in 2019 (COVID-19) as a worldwide pandemic (WHO, 2020a). The global impact has been profound. At the time of this publication, there were

nearly 6 million deaths worldwide, with close to 1 million of these and counting within the United States alone (WHO, 2022). In addition to the overwhelming loss of life, the pandemic has also caused enormous social and economic disruptions worldwide due to implementation of various protectionary measures, such as ‘shelter in place’ orders, school and workplace closures, quarantines, and social distancing practices (WHO, 2020b). This has had significant repercussions for all aspects of the way people live, work, eat, learn, and socialize.

Further, disruptions to global labor markets have resulted in mass job losses worldwide, with evidence of disproportionate impact to those who are younger, less educated, immigrants, members of indigenous, racial, and ethnic minority groups, and women (Couch et al., 2020; Kochhar, 2020), threatening to deepen pre-existing social inequalities and poverty levels worldwide (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; WHO 2020b). These and other cascading effects of the pandemic have led researchers to speculate that, based on outcomes from prior global pandemics, the long-term economic, social, and mental health impacts may ultimately take more lives than the pandemic itself (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2021; APA, 2020).

Preliminary evidence suggests that COVID-19 has already reaped a disproportionate impact on the economic, social, and physical wellbeing of women around the globe (United Nations, 2020). In terms of economic impact, in the United States women have comprised a higher percentage of job losses in comparison with their male counterparts (Alon et al., 2020; Couch et al., 2020), especially among black and Hispanic women (Kochhar, 2020), threatening the livelihood and survival of many working mothers and their children. Some policy analysts have described women’s

reduced paid labor force participation during the pandemic in terms of a ‘*she-cession*’ (Gupta, 2020). Job losses also threaten to erase gender equity gains that women have made through increased labor force participation over the last several decades (Couch et al., 2020), with social location and demographic factors playing a definitive role in determining the degree and severity of the impact (Adams-Prassl, 2020).

On the whole, women have been hit particularly because of two main reasons: their higher representation in lower paid service sector jobs disproportionately impacted by shutdowns and layoffs (e.g., restaurant workers, retail industry; Alon et al., 2020; Couch et al., 2020) and persistent gendered divisions in earning and caregiving, resulting in working mothers shouldering a disproportionate burden of unpaid labor and caregiving (Heggeness, 2020). In analyzing labor market data in the early stages of COVID-19 (March-August 2020), several teams of researchers found that women’s working hours were reduced more significantly in proportion to comparable men (Alon et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2020; Couch et al., 2020), with the most notable declines in employment hours observed among working mothers of school-aged children. In one set of analyses using triple difference estimates to stratify the sample, Couch and colleagues found that working mothers of children from various age groups (0-5, 6-13, 14-17) all suffered larger reductions in employment than both women with no children and comparable men, with mothers of school-aged children most disproportionately impacted. Working mothers of both elementary and high school aged children (6-17 years) suffered job losses that were up to 4.8 percentage points higher than their male counterparts (Couch et al., 2020). Using Current Population Survey (CPS) data and adjusting for state-level differences in school closures, one economist arrived at an estimate of approximately 1.6

million fewer mothers in the workforce in September of 2020 attributable to home/family care responsibilities (Tedeschi, 2020).

Further, nationwide school and childcare facility closures, impacting more than 50 million public school children in every state and many private school students as well (Education Week, 2021), have had profound consequences not just for children, but their caregivers too—in most cases, mothers. For children, school closures meant educational setbacks and declines, as well as lack of regular routine, structure, and social interaction with peer groups, all of which is developmentally critical at the elementary school age. It is not yet known what type of long-term educational and mental health effects the pandemic will have on the current generation of children, but experts have already been sounding the alarms about rising rates of mental health challenges among kids (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2021) and widening academic achievement gaps for kids from low-income and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds (Dorn et al., 2020). Given evidence that mothers are more involved in both tangible and psychological aspects of childrearing (Chesley, 2017; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019), as well as that school systems tend to collude with hegemonic gender role norms positioning mothers as primarily responsible for overseeing their children's schooling (Chesley & Flood, 2017), it is likely that mothers have shouldered the greatest responsibility for remote schooling, as preliminary evidence suggests (Heggeness & Fields, 2020). They may also have been more prone to worrying about the academic and emotional toll of the pandemic on their children due to educational disruptions.

Unquestionably, the double duty of remote working—if even a possibility— and school facilitation has presented the greatest challenge to single breadwinner mothers,

who are disproportionately women of color, younger, and live below the federal poverty line (PRC, 2013). However, many of these single breadwinning women tend to be over-represented in low paid service sector industries and among front-line healthcare workers (National Partnership for Women and Families [NPWF], 2020). Thus, for many of these mothers, remote working may not have been a possibility, even though continued employment due to economic necessity increased their risk of COVID-19 exposure, just as customary reliance on family and kin networks for childcare would have risked the possibility of COVID-19 transmission to others.

The disruptions to school and childcare have also had difficult repercussions for many married and/or partnered working mothers of young and school-aged children. For many mothers within both these groups without remote work options, the circumstances of the pandemic effectively forced a rational, but still very difficult, decision to leave jobs (whether permanently or temporarily) in order to care and facilitate schooling for their children, despite the potential of negative impacts to their family, their careers, or their own mental health and wellbeing. Under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) enacted under the Trump administration in March of 2020, and later amended by the CARES Act, working parents of school-aged children were able to take up to 12 weeks of leave at two-thirds their regular pay. However, women's rights advocates noted that, after exemptions for businesses with more than 500 employees, more than 59 million workers were excluded from accessing the benefit (NPWF, 2020).

Another group of mothers that may have faced unique challenges during the pandemic are breadwinning mothers of school-aged children who concurrently worked remotely and facilitated remote schooling for their children, whether entirely on their

own or in conjunction with a spouse, partner, or live-in family member. Preliminary research at the time of this literature review has shown that mothers who worked remotely during the pandemic, even when the breadwinner earner in dual-income families, still took on the lion's share of parenting, household responsibilities, and facilitating remote schooling during the pandemic (Heggeness, 2020; Heggeness & Fields, 2020; Kashen et al., 2020). Moreover, on top of the general stress, anxiety, and isolation that many have experienced during the pandemic (APA, 2020; Brooks et al., 2020), breadwinning mothers have experienced these on top of already significant work-life balance challenges, including extreme fatigue, role strain and overload, parental stress, and relational strain, all of which could negatively impact long-term mental health and wellbeing. As reviewed, working mothers in general have also long experienced myriad systemic, structural, and ideological challenges when combining work with motherhood, which may be further heightened or experienced differentially by factors of social location (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation). For many working mothers, the circumstances of the pandemic likely served to significantly intensify all of these challenges. If the working mother is also the family breadwinner, whether the sole breadwinner or the breadwinner in a dual-income family, having to maintain the economic stability of the family may have added another layer of stress, particularly given this as a counter-normative role for women within a cultural context of competing ideologies pertaining to intensive mothering and the ideal worker.

Study Purpose and Problem Statement

Based on the literature reviewed, working mothers have conceivably shouldered a disproportionate burden during the COVID-19 pandemic related to the navigation of

work-life responsibilities. Of working mothers fortunate to have maintained employment, what has been frequently described as a ‘pressure cooker’ situation for many working mothers may have exponentially intensified. Consequently, I intended to amplify the voices of breadwinning mothers of various relational statuses and backgrounds who shared in common the experience of navigating multiple roles and responsibilities at an unexpected level during the global COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, through this research I aimed to better understand the experiences of breadwinning mothers who combined working remotely with facilitating remote schooling for their elementary school-aged children (ages 5-12) during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also managing their other life roles and responsibilities. This included focus to both single working mothers who were sole breadwinners and breadwinning mothers in dual-working marriages and partnerships.

By shining a spotlight on working mothers who navigated remote work and remote schooling for their children, it was not my intention to reinforce traditional stereotypes that relegate childcare and household responsibilities to the mother. Instead, I aimed to examine how the circumstances of the pandemic may have impacted the well-evidenced pervasiveness of mothers’ disproportionate burdens in navigating work and family responsibilities, even when the mother was the breadwinner within dual-income households, whether reinforcing it (i.e. “doing gender”), or in heeding the call by Deutsch (2007), examining efforts made to challenge or resist dominant gendered ideologies in relation to their roles as mothers and workers (i.e. “undoing gender”). Additionally, I also aimed to pay particular attention to heterogeneity of experiences relative to intersecting identity variables pertaining to social location (e.g., race, class), including the ways that

these shaped the meaning making that breadwinning mothers ascribed to their experiences.

Research Questions

This study was informed and guided by two primary research questions: (a) *What were the lived experiences of breadwinning mothers of elementary school-aged children who concurrently worked remotely and facilitated remote schooling for their children during the COVID-19 pandemic?*, and (b) *How did these mothers make meaning of their experiences in relation to competing ideologies regarding their intersecting roles and identities?* Under the aegis of the first research question, I aimed to better understand the specific experiences of breadwinning mothers' of elementary school-aged children who concurrently navigated working remotely, facilitating remote schooling, and managed other household responsibilities, whether solely as single breadwinning mothers or in tandem with a partner in dual-income households, during the initial phase of the pandemic. The second research question involved close examination of the meaning that these breadwinning mothers ascribed to their experiences in relation to competing ideologies around social constructions of ideal motherhood, ideal workers, and other identity variables. As it has been argued that counselors frequently lack awareness of the biases and challenges facing working mothers (Jackson & Slater, 2017; Schwarz, 2017), it was also hoped that findings from this research would yield important implications for how counselors can effectively work with and advocate for breadwinning mothers in a variety of counseling contexts, both in relation to the potentially cascading mental health after-effects of the pandemic and in general.

Chapter 2: METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009) was used to answer the research questions due to its potential for generating in-depth description of how individuals experience and ascribe meaning to significant events or circumstances, therefore constituting ‘an experience’ (p. 33). I assumed that breadwinning mothers of elementary school-aged children during the pandemic experienced enormous challenges to work-life balance, and therefore their cumulative experiences during the initial phase of the pandemic rose to IPA’s definition of ‘an experience.’ Additionally, I assumed that breadwinning mothers’ experiences may have been shaped by hegemonic ideologies related to gender and motherhood, as well as relational status and factors of social location. Therefore, as previously discussed in Chapter 1, the IPA approach employed in this study was also informed by theoretical frameworks of “doing” and “undoing gender” and intersectionality. This unique design was believed to be well suited to generate rich description of breadwinning mothers’ experiences and meaning-making related to their experiences during the initial phase of the pandemic given the time period of this research.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009) is a qualitative research methodology that has shown tremendous growth since its initial development from within the field of health psychology nearly 25 years ago (Smith & Eatough, 2019). As an established experiential qualitative approach, IPA focuses on

generating rich descriptions based on lived experiences, and is rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2019).

Phenomenology is rooted in a constructivist philosophical perspective, and is concerned with how people experience, describe, and interpret things through all of their senses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The underlying epistemology is that the creation of knowledge is embodied, and never simply cognitive (Husserl, 1913/1982). Although there are various schools of phenomenology shaped largely by the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and other twentieth century philosophers, all share in common the fundamental search for the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). Thus, methods of phenomenology as a research science are primarily descriptive and inductive. IPA's particular conception of phenomenology has been described as a "broad and holistic phenomenology concerned with both pre-reflective and reflective domains of lived experience," with the former referring to embodiment of experiences before their conscious interpretation, as well as one that abstains from over-prescription of methods in alignment with the early philosophical movement of phenomenology (Smith, 2018, p. 1955).

Hermeneutics refers to a branch of knowledge concerned with interpretation, which at its epistemological core is the tenet that knowledge generation relies on interpretation (Patton, 2015). IPA aligns most closely with Heidegger's (1927/1962) philosophies of hermeneutic phenomenology, which hold that phenomena must be interpreted in order to be understood. In particular, IPA makes use of what has been referred to as its '*double hermeneutic*' feature (Smith et al., 2009), described as the application of the researcher's interpretative lens in making sense of the participant's own

sense-making and interpretative processes. In this way, IPA extends the concept of the '*hermeneutic circle*' (van Manen, 1990) to include researcher and subject as both dynamically involved in the circular and iterative engagement between part and whole. This has important implications for how IPA researchers regard data analysis, approaching it as a nonlinear and iterative process, as well as illustrates the dual role and stance of IPA researchers.

Idiography concerns itself with the descriptive and particularistic nature of phenomena, rather than *nomothetic* (i.e., generalized) notions of human behavior of which the psychological sciences are most commonly concerned (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the influence of idiography on IPA translates, in part, to a rigorous and systematic focus on detail. This is in line with its commitment to being an 'experience close' methodology, which means in practical terms that IPA researchers examine experience that has become 'an experience,' from the perspective of a particular person or groups of persons, within their respective particular contexts (p. 33). In relation to cultural concerns, the idiographic commitment of IPA is necessarily charged with highlighting the uniqueness and diversity of participants' experiences in relationship to a larger shared event or experience. For the purpose of the present study, the participants were all breadwinner mothers of elementary school-aged children who concurrently worked and facilitated school for their children remotely at some point during the pandemic. However, their experiences necessarily differed on account of racial/ethnic, class, and relationship diversity factors. As the researcher, I translated this idiographic commitment into concrete action in a number of different ways, including careful listening and respective engagement with participants throughout the study, utilizing inductive

methods of coding, examining for convergence and divergence when generating themes, and including participants' individual voices in the final report.

Study Procedures

Sampling Strategies and Rationale

I employed *unique* purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97) to recruit the final sample of 12 breadwinner mothers of elementary school-aged children (ages 5-12) who shared in common the experience of having worked remotely concurrent to facilitating remote schooling for their children during the COVID-19 pandemic, whether on their own (e.g., single breadwinner mothers) or with a partner/spouse. Unique purposeful sampling is a type of criterion sampling that probes a unique experience that participants share in common, while still aiming for maximum diversity in other respects. The sample size is in line with a review of recent IPA studies conducted within psychotherapy and social sciences research broadly (e.g., Harrison et al., 2020; Kawano, 2018; Smith & Rhodes, 2015; Smith et al., 2020). To reach the final sample size, I paid careful attention to data quality and quantity throughout all phases of data collection and analyses to ensure thick and rich data (Geertz, 1973). Here it is important to note that the concept of theoretical saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) does not hold the same importance in IPA research as in other types of qualitative research (e.g., grounded theory), as phenomenological methodologies do not aim to generate theory, rather describe the essence, or basic structure, of a lived experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26). For IPA research in particular, a main goal is to describe the essence of a phenomenon by giving voice to participants' uniquely embodied and socially situated experiences in alignment with idiographic principles (Smith et al., 2009). This often

translates to small sample sizes so that participant experiences can be mined with great depth.

Snowball, criteria, and network sampling strategies were utilized to recruit participants who met the study inclusion criteria and to ensure diversity of the final participant sample, approaches that are common in IPA research studies (e.g., Shinebourne & Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2020). Recruitment materials specified that participants needed to meet all of the following inclusion criteria: (a) primary household earner status, defined as earning the greater share or all of household income (51–100%), whether single, partnered, cohabitating, or married (Wang et al., 2013); (b) worked remotely for at least some portion of time during the COVID-19 pandemic; and (c) a mother of one or more elementary school-aged (ages 5-12) children who required remote schooling for at least some portion of time during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The rationale for focusing on mothers of elementary school-aged children was based on the premise that younger school-aged children likely required more assistance and oversight with all aspects of remote schooling from home than older school-aged children who may have been more self-sufficient and/or better able to function independently. For school-aged children, helping to facilitate a child's remote schooling may have involved many of the same tasks that teachers and school staff perform in the classroom and school building, including lesson instruction in a wide variety of subject areas, providing assistance with virtual platforms and technology (if used), providing food and preparing meals, behavioral management, and more. Facilitating academic instructional tasks, in particular, require effort in the cognitive domain that, for parents also concurrently remote working, were theorized to require cognitive labor within the

same temporal space, and therefore, may have posed considerable challenges. There were no specific exclusion criteria, except that participants were required to meet all inclusion criteria and could not actively be a risk to themselves or others.

Participant Recruitment

Approval to conduct the study was first obtained from the University of Missouri-St. Louis Institutional Review Board. Following IRB approval, recruitment notices (see Appendix A) detailing in brief the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits involved in participating in the study were posted on social media (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), online parent networking sites (e.g., Art of Parenting forum), networking sites of professional associations (e.g., American Counseling Association), and via word-of-mouth through colleague and participant referrals to other potential participants, as per snowball sampling methods. Further, I made concerted efforts to recruit both non-White and non-heterosexual identified breadwinner mothers as part of the sample by highlighting the need for diverse participants in recruitment materials and by soliciting the assistance of colleagues who identified as members of these groups and/or who worked with organizations serving the needs of mothers from diverse backgrounds. As part of these efforts, in the summer of 2021 I convened a voluntary group of seven graduate level students from diverse backgrounds who were also mothers to review and provide feedback on a collection of stock images I had purchased for potential use in the recruitment materials. The images depicted women of diverse backgrounds in scenarios that mirrored the research topic (e.g., women engaged in work tasks in home-like environments with young children also engaged in various school or other home-based

activities). Feedback from these groups of volunteers was used to select the final images used in the recruitment materials.

Participant recruitment occurred over an eight-week period from August–September of 2021. The recruitment materials contained both a hyperlink and a QR code that directed interested participants to complete an online prescreening questionnaire hosted through Qualtrics survey software. Before proceeding to the prescreening questionnaire, participants were first directed to review the complete informed consent document hosted on the first page of the survey (see Appendix B), which fully outlined the purpose and procedures of the research. As part of this, participants were informed that the researcher would begin selecting participants from the selection pool based on order of survey completion, and with attention to diversity selection criteria (e.g., race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, relational status) in order to ensure a diverse sample. Additionally, interested participants were also informed that, if selected to complete an interview, they would receive a \$25 Amazon gift card within one week of completing their interview, as well as would be asked to be available for follow-up contact by the researcher approximately 8-12 weeks after their interview in order to provide feedback on the study's preliminary themes via member reflections (Tracy, 2010). After reviewing the informed consent document, those who remained interested in participating and wished to be placed in the selection pool were directed to signal their consent by clicking a button to proceed with the prescreening questionnaire.

Prescreening Questionnaire

The prescreening questionnaire (see Appendix C) ensured that potential participants met inclusion criteria and collected demographic information to enable selection of a diverse sample. Demographic questions directed participants to self-report age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, highest level of education attained, annual household income earned, approximate percentage of household income they earned, spiritual/religious beliefs, geographic region, relational status, and the number and ages of their children/dependent(s). Several of these questions (e.g., percentage of household income they earned, ages of children/dependents) also served as additional checks on inclusion criteria. The prescreening survey also collected information about participant interview preferences and availability, as well as assessed interest in an optional art component for use in further research beyond the scope of this present inquiry. At the conclusion of the prescreening, potential interviewees were thanked for their interest and informed that selected participants would be contacted by the researcher to complete the individual interview and the follow-up survey. Recruitment into the selection pool remained open until the end of September 2021, at which point all participants had been selected and the majority of interviews had been completed. Once the prescreening survey closed, participants who were not selected were sent an email informing them that they had not been selected, but that their interest in the study was appreciated.

Participant Selection

A total of 49 individuals completed the prescreening questionnaire. Of these, I selected participants in the order of survey completion with attention to participant diversity characteristics. This involved selecting the first two to three participants from

demographic areas that yielded the greatest range of diversity (e.g., race/ethnicity, level of income, relationship status, number of children, geographic region) within the selection pool, and keeping in mind the intersectionality of participant diversity characteristics. Once a participant was selected, I reached out via email or telephone (based on their stated preference) to schedule a time for the individual interview within the next several weeks. If I did not hear back within one week, a follow up contact was made. After a third attempt at contacting a participant without hearing back, I moved on to select another participant. Thus, participant selection occurred in tandem with data collection, as is common in IPA research.

Of the 49 recorded responses received on the prescreening questionnaire, four of these did not meet study inclusion criteria and, through skip logic features of the software, were barred from completing the remainder of the prescreening. Of the 45 remaining qualified participants, I attempted or made contact with 18 individuals in all. Three never replied and were replaced with three other of these individuals. Two individuals initially replied and expressed interest in completing the interview, but ultimately were not able to find a time in their busy schedules, and the other individual did not reply until after all interviews were already completed. In these cases, I moved on to select three other of these individuals. This yielded the final sample of 12 participants. All interviews were completed during September and October of 2021.

Data Sources

In addition to participant responses from the prescreening questionnaire as previously described, data sources for this study consisted primarily of the participants'

interview transcripts, as well as the researcher's reflexive journal and responses to the follow-up questionnaire (e.g., member reflections).

Participant Interviews

All participants completed one single, semi-structured individual interview that lasted around 90 minutes on average, and ranged from 64–135 minutes. All interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom Pro, a HIPAA compliant video communication platform. This enabled participation from individuals across various geographic regions at a time and place that was most convenient for them. In accordance with the core interpretative stance of IPA, as the primary researcher I conducted all interviews in order to maintain integrity and consistency of the hermeneutic circle between researcher and participants across all phases of data collection and analysis (Smith et al., 2009). I conducted all interviews from a private and confidential space within either my home or work office setting. Participants were encouraged to join the interview from any space where they felt comfortable to speak openly and freely. As an additional online security measure, participants were required to input a password in order to enter the online meeting room. All interviews were videotaped and the files were later downloaded to a password protected computer for purposes of transcription.

Several days prior to each interview, I sent each participant an interview reminder, as well as provided again the copy of the consent form that they had previously signed electronically when completing the prescreening. At the start of each interview before beginning the recording, I spent a few minutes reaffirming consent and giving participants an overview of the general flow of the interview. I also directed participants to select their own pseudonym to be used both in the transcription and final dissertation

and I gave participants another opportunity to ask questions before beginning. Following this, I proceeded to conduct the semi-structured interview, using probes as needed, to ensure depth in participant responses.

Following Smith et al.'s recommendations for IPA research, I viewed the interview protocol and schedule (see Appendix D) as a guide, rather than a rigid structure. Interview questions were worded in an open and expansive manner to elicit the participant's rich description and story of the experience. Additionally, when creating the interview questions, I obtained a volunteer with a doctorate in Counseling to interview me using the interview protocol as a way to pilot the questions and to determine adjustments in order increase clarity to sequence and wording. This also served to increase transparency and awareness of my own views and biases (i.e., bracketing), as will be discussed further in the researcher positionality section of this chapter. Furthermore, because participant interviewing and data transcription occurred simultaneously, I was able to further review and adjust interviewing strategy throughout the data collection process, as per Smith et al.'s recommendations.

In general, the interview sequence was structured to elicit participant responses regarding three broad areas: (a) how participants identified, defined, and understood themselves as mothers, as workers (i.e., in their jobs/careers), and as breadwinning mothers; (b) how the circumstances of the initial phase of the pandemic impacted them in specific relation to being breadwinning mothers of school-aged children, with consideration to other intersecting roles and identities; (c) and how they understood and made meaning of these experiences, both in terms of how they viewed themselves and their relationships to others. The series of questions was designed to generate rich and

close context description of participants' experiences, as well as enable analyses of how participants constructed their experiences with respect to dominant ideologies of motherhood, the ideal worker, and work-life balance issues. Follow-up probes were included for the majority of questions to stimulate further discussion and recollection, as needed (see Appendix D).

For purposes of future research outside the scope of the present dissertation, participants were also given the option to bring a visual artifact to the interview (e.g., drawing, collage, photograph, found object) of their experiences as a breadwinning mother of school-aged children during the pandemic. This optional extension to the interview (15 minutes) contained four questions that focused on participant meaning-making of their experiences in relation to the artwork. For purposes of the IRB approval process, information about this optional component was necessarily included in recruitment, consent, and procedure materials. However, resulting data from this optional component was not analyzed for this dissertation, as it was correctly assumed that not all selected participants would ultimately elect to participate. For those participants who brought an artwork or image to the interview and wished to complete the interview extension, I turned off the recording device and then restarted it in order to create a separate file for transcription purposes.

After completing the interview questions and turning off the recording device, participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed further about the purpose and goals of the study. At this time, I also confirmed the best way to send them a gift card, as well as reviewed and reaffirmed their willingness to participate to provide follow-up feedback at a later point in response to thematic findings (e.g., member

reflections). After ending the Zoom session, I immediately completed administrative tasks pertaining to data collection and security (see Appendix D), including downloading and backing up the video file to a secure password-protected external hard-drive. All interviews were transcribed verbatim using an automatic digital transcription service that had a high degree of accuracy. Following this, I reviewed each transcript in conjunction with the video file to correct any minor inaccuracies and make redactions to confidential information (e.g., participant names, locations). Because the focus in IPA is interpretation of the meaning of content, Smith et al. noted that overly-detailed transcription of prosodic aspects of speech (i.e., intonation, length of pauses) is unnecessary. However, I did make notations related to participant nonverbal communication (i.e., body language) to ensure attention to latent meaning (e.g., sarcasm).

Researcher's Reflexive Journal

I kept a reflexive journal as a means of recording thoughts, feelings, and observations throughout all phases of the research process, including during the development of the research proposal; all phases of participant recruitment, data collection, and analyses; and during the final write-up of dissertation chapters. I used the reflexive journal in both systematic and spontaneous ways. In terms of the former, I consistently and systematically wrote in the journal both before and after each conducting each participant interview. This was helpful as a way to increase awareness of and document any preconceived notions or anxieties before heading into each interview, as well as to notate immediate thoughts, feelings, or reactions in response to what was elicited during interviews. Additionally, because I also used peer debriefing on a weekly basis (see Methodological Integrity section in this chapter), the reflexive journal also

served as a way to further reflect on and/or record what came up during these conversations. I was able to return to these documented observations both to maintain awareness of biases and when considering whether my observations of participants corroborated other data in the process of developing the study's final themes. Finally, I also used the journal in a consistent way during all phases of thematic analysis, such as by creating hand-drawn color-coded charts to visually look for thematic recurrence across all participants when constructing the final themes. On a more spontaneous level, I used the journal to record thoughts and observations about all aspects of the research process as they arose. In the last stages of writing up the dissertation, the journal frequently functioned as a motivational tool and outlet for positive 'self-talk' and doodling that encouraged forward momentum throughout the writing process.

Member Reflections

I followed up with all participants between eight and twelve weeks after their completed interview in order to invite their feedback on the preliminary conceptualization of the study's main themes. At this time, participants were also sent a copy of their transcript, along with a summary of their demographic details based on a synthesis of information from the prescreening questionnaire and the interview. In addition to providing feedback on the themes, participants were also invited to correct any errors that they saw in their transcripts or demographic summaries. Initially only three participants replied to my email with follow-up feedback on the themes. This was likely due to multiple factors: the timeframe in which feedback was requested (i.e., during the month of December), the surge of the Omicron strain of the virus at that time resulting in an uptick of school closures and a return to remote work for many, and the

level of detail initially sent explaining each theme. Due to this low initial response, I sent a second request for feedback in January of 2022 with a simplified explanation of each theme in an online survey format (see Appendix E) to increase the likelihood that more participants might reply. This yielded four additional responses. In total, 7 of the 12 participants provided the researcher with reflections and feedback on the study's themes. More information on the substance of participants' follow-up feedback is summarized at the end of the Results chapter.

Data Analysis

The research methods used in this study asked participants to make sense of their experiences by reconstructing them through verbal means during the interview process. Analysis of the resultant textual data (e.g., interview transcripts, researcher's reflexive journal) involved the researcher's own sense-making and interpretative lens, thereby employing the 'double hermeneutic' of the core methodology. As is common in IPA studies, one primary investigator was accountable for both the interviews and the interpretative processes that comprised analyses in order to ensure congruency of the hermeneutic circle. Thus, as the primary researcher, I completed all coding and thematic data analyses. However, as recommended by Smith et al. (2009), and as will be later discussed, several strategies were employed to ensure overall trustworthiness of the methods and findings, including obtaining follow-up feedback from participants regarding construction of themes and having an external auditor experienced in qualitative research examine a random selection of research materials.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of participant interviews was conducted based on the recommended steps described by Smith et al. (2009) in their seminal work: (a) reading and re-reading the transcript of the first case in order to actively engage with the original data, which I refer to below as *Data Immersion*; (b) noting and making free-form commentary at descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual levels of the data; (c) developing emergent themes, defined as phrases that “contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual” (p. 92), and which I refer to below as *Generation of Codes*; (d) searching for connections across codes and making note of potential themes; (e) moving to the next case, and repeating the above process for all transcripts; and (f) looking for patterns across initial codes and potential themes from all cases in order to develop overarching themes that summarized the essence of what was most common for participants in direct relation to the research questions. In developing the final set of themes, this last step also involved examining for divergence, whether on individual and/or subgroup levels, and making decisions about how to incorporate components of divergence relative to themes in accordance with idiographic underpinnings of IPA. As utilizing these steps involved examining each case in-depth before moving on to analyses across cases, I was able to collect and analyze the data in an iterative fashion before data collection was fully completed. In summary, the IPA analytic techniques used in this study can be characterized as nonlinear, iterative, rigorous, and systematic (Smith et al., 2009). The following sections provide more detail concerning my process with respect to each of these steps.

Data Immersion

In this first step, I read through the digital file of each participant's transcript in tandem with viewing the participant's video recording. This allowed me to immerse myself in the data, at the same time as making minor corrections to the digitally transcribed transcript, as needed, including the redaction of names of persons or specific locations. During this step, I also made notations within the transcript, as previously discussed, in order to highlight nonverbal communication that might provide a better context for the participant's intended meaning. In preparation for the next step, I printed a hard copy of the transcript, leaving wide margins on both the right and left sides of each document.

Noting and Commentary at Descriptive, Linguistic, and Conceptual Levels

For this step, I read through each transcript and underlined excerpts and made free-form commentary on the righthand side of the document using three different colors of ink: *red* to denote descriptive information, *blue* to indicate linguistic observations, and *green* to denote conceptual commentary. Descriptive commenting hewed closely to the manifest level of information that the participant directly stated, such as their given description of information about an event or a directly stated feeling. This level of commentary might be thought of as akin to inductive coding, although as recommended by Smith et al. (2009), I did not make efforts at this point to restrict these notations to short labels, as is typically the case when generating codes. Linguistic observations involved looking specifically at the participant's use of language and noting any significant observations. For example, a linguistic notation might be made when a participant frequently used double negatives or linguistically circled around a topic. The conceptual level of commenting makes room for the researcher's own interpretative lens

to enter the equation, and to this end, I often included questions, thoughts, or observations about the latent meaning beneath the surface of the participant's words. Quite often these questions or commentaries were informed by considering the participant's descriptive details together with linguistic observations and their use of nonverbals, as previously noted and observed when reviewing again their video.

Generation of Codes

In this step, I read through the open commentary on the righthand side of each transcript, and using a black pen, generated a shortened code that more succinctly describe the textual commentary and wrote this on the left side of the transcript. In most cases, the codes generated were largely based on the descriptive commentary and can be best described as inductive coding. However, given the interpretive focus of IPA research, some codes took into consideration linguistic or conceptual underpinnings of what seemed to be expressed latently, and in this way, incorporated the researcher's interpretative lens. For example, the code '*mother role as paramount*' was applied to succinctly describe the essence of a participant's story about how she viewed the relative importance of the various roles she occupied in her life (e.g., "They come first. There's no question. It's my most important role."). As another example, numerous participants described feeling that they were constantly engaged in ensuring the emotional wellbeing of everyone in their households. Discussions pertaining to this were typically paired with explicit statements of this as 'hard work' and nonverbals suggesting that it can be exhausting and/or unpleasant at times (e.g., sighing, shaking of head). Thus, the code '*experiences motherhood as involving continuous emotional labor*' was generated. As I moved through the transcripts, the process gradually became more deductive. If the

information seemed closely connected to another code previously used for another participant, I elected to use the same label. In order to remain as close as possible to each participant's idiosyncratic experiences, a codebook was not generated. This process resulted in a range of between 86-107 initial codes per participant. See Appendix F for an example of a de-identified participant coding sheet.

Development of Preliminary and Final Themes

In this step, I searched for connections and relationships between codes in order to construct preliminary themes across all participants. To organize this process, I first entered all of the codes into a separate MS Word Document for each participant. Given the flow of the interview protocol, this initially grouped codes in accordance with basic categories. For example, codes pertaining to the participant's experience of remote schooling were placed together in a column entitled, "Remote Schooling." Next, I printed out participants' coding sheets and pinned them to the same visual plane (e.g., large bulletin board) to facilitate a manual search for connections across codes.

This process was at once both creative and deconstructive, as I used markers to draw lines connecting ideas between coding sheets, used scissors to separate codes and regroup them, and various other processes. I also used my reflexive journal to make notations about how things might connect, consulted previous reflexive journal entries, and made several hand-drawn charts. Moreover, at this stage I frequently reviewed the two primary research questions for this study (included at the top of each coding sheet) to ensure that the preliminary themes generated from this step were directly connected to the research questions. Codes pertaining to participants' general contexts as mothers, workers, and breadwinners were used to more fully describe participants both

individually and collectively, as well as to generate a contextual frame of understanding through which participants' experiences during the pandemic might be better understood for purposes of theme generation. As a result of this process, nine preliminary themes were generated. As per Smith et al.'s (2009) recommendations, next I engaged in the process of examining for thematic recurrence in order to ensure evidence for final themes across the entire data set and to reduce the data to the suggested three to five final themes.

Examining for Thematic Recurrence. To examine for thematic recurrence, I created a chart with a color-coded side-bar column for each of the nine potential themes and top bar row for each of the 12 participants. Next, I went back through all 12 transcripts using a marker that matched the color code to find and highlight excerpts that provided definitive evidence of each theme. As a result of this process, I determined that four potential themes either did not have sufficient excerpt evidence across all participants or did not sufficiently rise to the level of a theme in close enough relation to the research questions. Additionally, two themes were found to be deeply interconnected and combined into one theme, as I found myself highlighting the same excerpt passages for these potential themes across the majority of participants. In this way, I followed Smith et al.'s (2009, p. 106–107) recommended test for thematic recurrence when working with larger samples using IPA methodology. This process (see Appendix G) served to demonstrate congruence between participants' experiences and the four final themes, which is further supported by inclusion of verbatim extracts from each participant in the explication of each theme in Chapter Three.

Methodological Integrity

Lincoln and Guba (1985) contended that considerations of validity and reliability, as traditionally applied to positivist research methodologies, do not align with the underlying assumptions of qualitative research. Instead, they proposed that criteria of *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* be adopted for use with qualitative research. *Trustworthiness* and *authenticity* are two other terms that describe criteria commonly used to judge the merits of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), with some asserting that particular types of qualitative research may call for their own distinctive set of evaluative criteria in judging overall quality (Creswell, 2013).

Evaluating Methodological Integrity Specific to IPA

Smith et al. (2009) deemed Yardley's (2000) principles of trustworthiness as particularly suitable for evaluating the quality and validity of IPA research projects. This involves focus to four main areas: (a) sensitivity to context, (b) commitment and rigor, (c) transparency and coherence, and (d) impact and importance. These areas largely mirror the eight "big-tent" criteria that Tracy (2010) more recently put forth as sound indicators for evaluating excellence in qualitative research. However, Tracy denoted credibility as a specific criteria, whereas Yardley implied it within the domain of transparency and coherence. Therefore, I added the term 'credibility' to the subheading of the third domain. In the following sections, I discuss how I addressed each of these areas, embedding discussion of specific strategies utilized to ensure these criteria (e.g., peer debriefing, member reflections, external auditor) within pertinent sections.

Sensitivity to Context

Sensitivity to context was primarily demonstrated through my commitment to upholding idiographic principles in my care and attention to participants throughout the

entire research process. First, I carefully attended to participant context in the interview process, as evident by interview questions that aimed to assess participants' experiences in both a close and broad context manner. During the data transcription process, I viewed participant videos in conjunction with the transcripts, and made notations of nonverbal communication to better understand participants' intended meanings. As part of data analyses, I placed extensive focus to participants' contexts both when describing the sample and in generating the final themes. Extensive use of participant excerpts provided evidence of themes and, as discussed further below in relation to credibility, allowed for multivocality in the final report as another demonstration of idiographic principles. Finally, the literature review demonstrated my sensitivity to context with respect to prior knowledge of contextual factors related to research questions, and further, was a way of establishing credibility through triangulation of the data.

Commitment and Rigor

Commitment and rigor were demonstrated through my prolonged engagement with the research topic, and particularly when working with participants. This included in-depth attention to and engagement with participants over the course of several months from the time of recruitment, while setting up and conducting the interviews, and in following up with participants several months later to invite them to review the accuracy of transcripts and give their feedback on themes (e.g., member reflections; Tracy, 2010). I also demonstrated commitment and rigor insofar as my meticulous attention to ethical and procedural issues throughout the entire investigation, as well as while maintaining fidelity to idiographic and inductive principles consistent with IPA tenets throughout data analyses. Both of these are evidenced in this final report.

Reflexive Journaling and Peer Debriefing. As is common for IPA research (Smith et al., 2009), I also demonstrated commitment and rigor through use of both reflexive journaling and peer debriefing (Spall, 1998) as a way of engaging with and bracketing my reflections, biases, and assumptions as the researcher. Although not traditional bracketing in the sense of the term explicated by other phenomenological researchers (Moustakas, 1994), these strategies served an aim similar to bracketing by ensuring standards of rigor and transparency, thus reflecting researcher integrity. As previously discussed in the section on Data Sources, I engaged in reflexive journaling on a consistent basis throughout the entirety of the research process. With regards to peer debriefing, I met with a fellow doctoral level peer approximately one time weekly (eight times) during the two month data collection phase of the study (i.e., while conducting interviews). During these meetings, I openly voiced aloud my thoughts, feelings, and emotions in reaction to the participant interviews. The peer served as a ‘sounding board’ for my reflections, as well as used the Socratic method to ask questions in a way that helped me further engage with and clarify my thoughts and reactions. Following these meetings, I used my reflexive journal to follow up on what we had discussed further in writing.

Transparency, Coherence, and Credibility

Various strategies were employed to achieve and demonstrate transparency, coherence, and credibility. As already mentioned, use of peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and member reflections all served, in part, to promote these aims. Collection of multiple forms of data (e.g., interviews, prescreening questionnaire, member reflections, researcher’s reflexive journal), together with theoretical grounding in the

literature, constituted data and methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978), which in turn, served to support the confirmability of study findings (Creswell, 2014).

Additionally, as discussed earlier in this Chapter, I also integrated feedback from individuals outside the study (e.g., graduate level peers, doctoral committee) in order to ensure coherence and effectiveness of recruitment materials and interview items.

Coherence was also demonstrated through clear explication of congruence between the research design, procedures, and data analysis methods (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lastly, and deserving of further discussion, credibility and transparency of the researcher's methods were also evaluated through an external audit.

External Audit. A doctoral level volunteer was obtained to conduct an external audit of the research process and findings. This consisted of sending a de-identified sample of approximately 10% of participant data (e.g., transcripts and coding sheets from two cases), along with other pertinent research materials (i.e., final themes summary) to an individual outside of the study who evaluated the fidelity and credibility of the researcher's process and methods. The auditor was an individual with a Ph.D. with extensive research experience using qualitative methodologies. The auditor reported that there was clear evidence of fidelity to recommended IPA analytic procedures observed on the hard copy of transcripts and on coding sheets, evidence of commitment to participants through inductive and descriptive coding, and an overall assessment that final themes were evident in excerpts from the participant transcripts reviewed.

Impact and Importance

Finally, with respect to Yardley's (2000) principle of impact and importance, it was my belief that shining a spotlight on breadwinning mothers who navigated remote

work and remote schooling for their children during the pandemic was timely, relevant, and of critical importance for these and other women in similar circumstances, as well as the counselors who might serve them. As highlighted in Chapter One, working mothers have conceivably shouldered a disproportionate burden during the COVID-19 pandemic related to the navigation of work-life responsibilities. Further, researchers have speculated that impacts in the post-pandemic period may be just as devastating as the pandemic itself, particularly if the economic, social, and mental health needs of individuals and families are not effectively addressed. Thus, it was hoped that this research might also serve as a catalyst for discussion of how counselors can effectively work with and advocate for breadwinning mothers in a variety of counseling contexts, both in relation to the potentially cascading mental health after-effects of the pandemic and in general. Lastly, it was hoped that documenting how working mothers from various backgrounds experienced these challenges might prove fruitful for future generations of researchers who seek to retrospectively understand how circumstances of the pandemic may have contributed to social attitudes and changes in the post-pandemic period.

Researcher Positionality

Because qualitative approaches rely on the fidelity and integrity of the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, the researcher is encouraged to disclose aspects of identity, values, and biases that may impact the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Moreover, the researcher's open presentation of positionality and assumptions is held as integral to sound qualitative research design in that it enables the researcher to better manage biases and helps the reader to assess trustworthiness of a study based on how such factors may have impacted the findings.

With respect to IPA methodology, the researcher's interpretive lens is integral to the construction of the research findings (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, IPA researchers must be openly reflexive and disclosing of their own positionality, assumptions, and biases.

At the time of this research, I identified as a 44-year old White heterosexual cisgender female who was also a Doctoral Candidate in Counselor Education and Supervision, a nationally registered and board certified Art Therapist, and an Assistant Professor of Art Therapy at a small religiously affiliated private college. I taught in a hybrid online/low residency graduate art therapy and counseling program. Additionally, I also identified as a married, breadwinning mother of two elementary school-aged children who had consistently served as the family's primary household earner for over ten years, typically earning 75-85% of household income. Due to my spouse's employment loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, I became the sole earner. Although socioeconomic class is a multidetermined construct, influenced by factors of income, education, access to social capital and more, our annual income hovered at 200% of the federal poverty guidelines, putting us in the lower-middle class bracket, and enabling us to utilize state benefits to reduce the costs of healthcare for our children.

During the initial shutdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020 in the United States, I was deemed non-essential by the college and began working remotely, as did my spouse who was also teaching several on-campus classes at the same institution. Our children's school also closed on March 16th, 2020, and remained remote for the remainder of the school year. Therefore, my spouse and I were charged with working remotely at the same time as facilitating remote learning for our two children who were

in Kindergarten and 2nd grade at that time. This arrangement continued through the end of the 2019-2020 school year. In the fall, our children's school initially attempted in-person classes, before transitioning again to remote learning from September through January of 2021. It is my belief that transmission mitigation measures were necessary and were not in question. Nevertheless, I found that concurrent navigation of working remotely and facilitating remote school for two young children reaped an extraordinary physical and emotional toll on me, at one point resulting in a brief hospitalization due to heart palpitations and other symptoms suggestive of acute stress, anxiety, and fatigue. However, it also illuminated enactment of gendered disparities in my household, challenging me to personally interrogate these in relation to hegemonic ideologies of motherhood and work, including an examination of both tangible and intangible actions that I engaged in that seemed to either maintain gendered divisions within my household (i.e., doing gender) or resist them (i.e., undoing gender).

As the primary researcher of this study I acknowledge that my interest in the experiences of breadwinner mothers of elementary school-aged children who navigated working remotely and facilitating remote schooling for their children was driven by personal experience. Additionally, I recognize that my own personal experiences during the pandemic were influenced by unearned social privileges on account of individual factors, such as race and education. Thus, through this research, I aimed to amplify the experiences of a range of breadwinner mothers, including sole primary providers and breadwinner mothers in dual-income households across various axes of social location.

Chapter 3: RESULTS

This research focused on the experiences of breadwinner mothers who combined working remotely with facilitating remote schooling for their elementary school-aged children (ages 5-12) during the COVID-19 pandemic, whether on their own or in tandem with others, while also managing their other life roles and responsibilities. The sample included both single working mothers who were sole income earners in their households and married mothers in two-income households. For the purpose of this study, breadwinning was defined as earning the larger share (51-100%) of household income. Through a single semi-structured interview lasting approximately 90 minutes on average, 12 mothers of various backgrounds reflected in-depth on their experiences navigating multiple roles and responsibilities during the initial phases of the global COVID-19 pandemic. They also provided context for how they viewed themselves as mothers, workers, and breadwinners, both in general and during the pandemic. The study was guided by two main research questions: (1) What were the experiences of breadwinning mothers of elementary school-aged children who concurrently worked remotely and facilitated remote schooling for their children during the COVID-19 pandemic?, and (2) How did these mothers make meaning of their experiences in relationship to themselves, others, and dominant cultural ideologies of work, motherhood, and breadwinning?

This chapter first provides a description of participants, followed by presentation of thematic results based on analyses of the study's data sources. For this study, data sources included verbatim transcripts of participant interviews, the prescreening questionnaire, the researcher's reflexive journal, and member reflection responses. Participant excerpts comprise a significant portion of this chapter in order to illustrate

themes and amplify participants' experiences in line with the idiographic commitment and philosophy of IPA methodology. As indicated in Chapter Two, each participant was asked to choose their own pseudonym in order to protect their confidentiality.

Additionally, some other information has either been removed or generalized from participant quotations, such as children's names or names of companies, in order to further preserve confidentiality.

Description of Participants

A total of 12 individuals served as participants for this study. As previously described in Chapter Two, participants were entered into the selection pool after completing an online prescreening questionnaire to ensure that they met study inclusion criteria (e.g., mother to one or more elementary school-aged children, experience of working remotely and remote schooling of children during pandemic, and breadwinner status). Participants were then selected in order of survey completion, and with attention to diversity selection criteria (e.g., race/ethnicity, geographic region, relational status) based on principles of maximum variation sampling, in order to attain participants with a diversity of experiences and backgrounds given the theoretical framework of intersectionality underpinning this study.

All participants self-identified as female mothers, ranging in age from 35 to 47, with a mean age of 41. A variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds were represented: 5 participants identified as White/European American, 4 as Black/African American, 2 as Latinx and White, and 1 as Chinese-Indonesian. A majority of participants identified as heterosexual ($n = 10$), with two identifying as bisexual. In terms of relationship status, the sample was roughly split between those who were married and living with their spouses

($n = 6$) and those who were single and either divorced, separated, or had never married ($n = 5$). One participant identified as partnered, but did not live with her partner. Participants had between 2 and 6 children, with most ($n = 10$) having either 2 or 3 children, and represented various geographic regions throughout the United States. See Table 1 below for a summary of participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation	Religion	Region	Relationship Status	# Children
Gal	40	White/Eur. Am.	Heterosexual	Catholic	Midwest	M	3
Kaia	43	White/Eur. Am.	Heterosexual	Christian, n.d.	Southeast	M	6
Heather	36	White, Latinx	Heterosexual	None	Southeast	M	2
Laila	35	Black/Af. Am.	Heterosexual	Spiritual, unaffiliated	Southwest	S, n.m.	2
Genieve	40	White, Latinx	Heterosexual	Agnostic, Jewish	Northeast	S, d	3
Koala	44	Chinese, Indonesian	Heterosexual	Christian, e.P.	Northeast	M	3
Ms. Piggy	44	White/Eur. Am.	Heterosexual	Catholic	Midwest	S, d	2
Michele	42	Black/Af. Am.	Heterosexual	Christian, n.d.	South	M	2
Smart Lady	38	Black/Af. Am.	Bisexual	Christian n.d.	South	M	3
Elle	46	Black/Af. Am.	Heterosexual	Christian	Midwest	S, d	4
Noelle	37	White/Eur. Am.	Bisexual	Christian n.d.	Midwest	S, d	2
Rosemary Jane	47	White/Eur. Am.	Heterosexual	Spiritual, unaffiliated	Pacific Northwest	P	2

Note: For relationship status, M = married & living with spouse; S = single; d= divorced, n.m. = never married, P = partnered, but not co-living; For religion, n.d.= non-denominational, e.p.= evangelical Protestant

As part of study inclusion criteria, participants were also asked specific questions in the prescreening questionnaire about their household income and the percentage of income they earned. They further discussed their educational and occupational backgrounds during the interview, including highest degree earned, job title/role, work setting, and length of time as the majority earner in their household. All participants held

college degrees, with most holding at least a Master's degree or higher ($n = 9$).

Accordingly, most participants could be characterized as professional class, or *white-collar* workers, who performed administrative, managerial, or other human services work in office type settings, although specific job roles and settings varied. However, half of participants ($n = 6$) worked jobs that could be characterized as direct human-facing service roles, including a Kindergarten teacher, two faculty members in higher education, and several counselors who worked in school or private practice settings.

Socioeconomically, based on an examination of reported household income relative to family size and region, participants ranged from lower to upper income tiers (see Bennett et al., 2020). Two-thirds of participants ($n = 8$) could be characterized as spanning the middle to upper-middle class income tiers, and the remaining four participants (all of whom but one were single mothers) could be described as lower income, working class, or *working poor*. Ten participants indicated that they made a significant majority or all (76-100%) of their household income, and two indicated that they earned the greater share of income (51-75%). Further, 11 of 12 participants indicated having been the household breadwinner for a sustained period of time, at least two years or more, prior to the pandemic. One participant became the breadwinner during the pandemic after her spouse at that time became unemployed. Table 2 below provides a summary of participants' education, professional roles, and financial characteristics surrounding their breadwinner status as defined in this research.

Table 2

Participant Education, Worker Role, and Breadwinner Characteristics

Pseudonym	Highest Degree	Job Title/ Role*	Occupational Setting*	Household Income	% of HH Earnings	Sustained BW- 2 yrs+
Gal	MA	Director of Provider and Payer Relations	Homeless for Healthcare Provider	125-150K+	76-100%	Y

Kaia	MA	School Counselor and Art Therapist	Public School District	50-75K	51-75%	Y
Heather	MA	Senior Director of Program Mgmt.	International Non-Profit Organization	125-150K+	51-75%	Y
Laila	MA	Special Education Counselor	Public School Setting	75-100K	76-100%	Y
Genieve	BA	Executive Assistant, Communications	Philanthropy	125-150K+	76-100%	Y
Koala	MA	Senior Enablement Architect	Information Technology	125-150K+	76-100%	Y
Ms. Piggy	MA	Kindergarten teacher	Elementary school (private)	25-50K	51-75%	N
Michele	PhD	Counselor Educator	Higher Education, P.P.	125-150K+	76-100%	Y
Smart Lady	MA	Consultant, Counselor	Mental and Public Health, P.P.	75-100K	76-100%	Y
Elle	BA	Client Service Associate	Wealth Management Firm	25-50K	76-100%	Y
Noelle	MA	Lecturer of Psychology	Higher Education	25-50K	76-100%	Y
Rosemary Jane	MA	Director of Finance	Manufacturing	125-150K+	76-100%	Y

Note: *indicates job role and settings held by participant during initial phase of pandemic, from March 2020 through Spring 2021; P.P.= private practice

Participants' Contexts of Motherhood and Working Motherhood

A portion of each interview focused on the participant's context as a mother and as a working mother in a more generalized way apart from their experiences during the pandemic. To this end, participants were prompted to discuss their intentions, journeys, and views related to motherhood generally, including discussion of how they came to be a mother, how they defined as a mother generally, and how they viewed their mother role and identity relative to perceived dominant social and cultural expectations. They also described in more depth their general experiences of working motherhood prior to the pandemic. Tables 3–6 below provide a summary of significant statements relaying each mother's individualized conceptualizations of motherhood and working motherhood. The unique and particularized views of each mother is evident when reading her experiences

in her own words. The impact of social and cultural location, as well as personal hardships or relationship status, in shaping the views and experiences of motherhood and working motherhood, becomes more clear. At the same time, areas of convergence across the majority of participants are discernible.

In terms of journey to motherhood (see Table 3), even though several participants questioned the notion of a ‘maternal instinct,’ most participants indicated that having children was an intentional and planned endeavor, as well as something that they had always wanted for themselves. In cases where it was not planned, it was described as either feeling ‘normal’ or welcome. Thus, for these participants, motherhood was a purposeful and intentional life role.

Table 3

Participants’ Significant Statements related to Motherhood Journey and Intentions

Pseudonym	Key Participant Quotes
Gal	<i>“I always knew I wanted to have kids. I think I got pregnant, like, a year after we got married. And yes, definitely, we were very fortunate. It came very easy to us.”</i>
Kaia	<i>“I was 27, so I wasn’t a super young mom, but I was ready. I wanted to get married and have a baby, so I was ready for it. But it was a surprise pregnancy.”</i>
Heather	<i>“I think we were just wanting to experience each other and experience a little bit of life and wanting to be more, like, financially secure before we started having kids, so we were in a good place when we decided to try, and it happened really fast.”</i>
Laila	<i>“The journey to becoming a mom? It was intentional. So they were definitely planned and, uh, and I got two boys.”</i>
Genieve	<i>“So it was always in the back of my mind, but it was never...I never felt like a maternal instinct that I had to have kids right away, or at any time, or that I wanted, you know, to devote being a stay-at-home mom or doing all the, like, “mom-type” things. I always knew I wanted to keep working, but then I wanted to have kids being a part of my life.”</i>
Koala	<i>“I never felt like, you know, there are women who have a strong urge to have babies...and so for them marriage is as a means to have kids or have babies. So I never have [sic] that urge. I knew I wanted to get married because I felt like I wanted to have a partner to journey in life, but I never had the strong urge to have kids until, I guess one of my close friends had her daughter.”</i>
Ms. Piggy	<i>“I always wanted to be a mom. I was one of those kids that played school when I was little. And I knew I wanted more than one because I hated being an only child. But yeah, I’ve always liked little kids... that’s just kind of ‘nurture-y’ me.” “And so I feel lucky because there was a point in time where I didn’t think I was gonna [sic] be able to have kids.”</i>

Michele	<i>“And so I’ve been a mom for 13 years... so when I had them, just focusing on them, making sure they’re okay, making sure I’m being the best mom I can be and often neglecting myself sometimes, and my husband too as well.”</i>
Smart Lady	<i>“I got married when I was 19 and I wanted to have children right away. And I was unable to have children for ten years. And I started applying to doctoral programs and industrial organizational psychology. I got really sick and I found out that I was pregnant with my first child was...I thought it was cancer. And so it was not planned and I felt like it was such a miracle.”</i>
Elle	<i>“I’m a single mom as of 2017. And in the span after that, talking to old friends I hadn’t talked to since maybe the earliest years of marriage, and some of their questions was [sic], ‘oh, did you become a mom?!’ So apparently it was something I talked about a lot.”</i>
Noelle	<i>“It’s always been a sense that, yes, I did want to be a mom. There’s definitely a nurturing part of my personality, and probably why I went into a therapy career, or like, an education career... and, um, I’d considered before marriage, I had honestly been considering adoption or fostering just for myself because I didn’t want to wait on someone else to be able to have that role for my life.”</i>
Rosemary Jane	<i>“Well, I wouldn’t say that I was a planned mother. So how I came to be a mother was one accidental night in Hollywood. That’s the truth! I think I just sort of always felt like a mom kind of because I’m an older sibling of many siblings. So it just sort of felt normal. It was just like, okay, yeah, this makes sense about this age.”</i>

Table 4 below concerning how participants experienced their role as mothers shows a diversity of perspectives, but also convergence in that participants largely viewed being a mother as positive, important, and fulfilling, albeit often complex and emotionally challenging work.

Table 4

Participants’ Significant Statements related to Mother Role and Identity

Pseudonym	Key Participant Quotes
Gal	<i>“being a mom is, like, my most important role. Like, they are the most important people to me. I’ll do anything for them. I’ll stop anything.”</i>
Kaia	<i>“I love, love being a mom...I try to be open with my kids and talk to them about whatever struggles they’re going through...and being able to voice whatever emotions they’re having or successes.”</i>
Heather	<i>“I mean, I think it’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done. And it’s like, it’s all the worrying and the little things. But it’s also super rewarding and all that.”</i>
Laila	<i>“I’ve been really intentional about doing things differently from how I was raised...and I’m raising boys, so I’m very intentional. I want them to be able to identify their feelings and emotions... I also recognize that I’m raising two black boys primarily on my own, and that’s—just in the way the world is now—for me, that’s scary.”</i>
Genieve	<i>“I guess you could say I’m a fun mom. I take a great deal of interest in doing things that are, you know, small but important when it comes to school stuff, like, that’s where I feel like I shine.”</i>
Koala	<i>“it’s interesting because I feel like I’m becoming my mom. I am my mom! When I come to America, I saw this little girl bring a cupcake and the cupcake drop [sic], and the mom</i>

	<i>was like, 'oh, it's ok,' and I was reflecting, I would have been yelled at, like, straight up! I want to be that mom, you know, where I'm not going to yell at my kid... and yet that's exactly what I do."</i>
Ms. Piggy	<i>"I am not the mom that wants to be the best friend. I'm the mom that will love you and support you and you can tell me anything. But if there's something I don't like, I'm going to let you know..."</i>
Michele	<i>"They are everything for me—like, not everything, because I still put myself first, so let's be clear—but I've had to learn that over time, right?...but whatever I don't want them to say about me as a mother [laughter], I try to navigate now."</i>
Smart Lady	<i>"I am not in a headspace of mommy ever, to be honest, because I am always having to work. I have lots of hats and my spouse is a stay-at-home dad, but he doesn't do stay-at-home dad duties... I just think it's not a good fit for him...I just want my kids to be alive when I get home, you know [laughter], if they're here then I feel like, yes, you made it through another day, I'm grateful to God! I'm probably more of the emotional person and parent...and so I do think I'm a mom that, like, expresses love and emotion."</i>
Elle	<i>"I am the hot mess mom, so I can boldly proclaim that I am a hot mess! Now catch me 20 or 18 years ago, I was not there. I thought I was going to be the perfect mom. And so the last 20 years have unfolded to reveal that that's not even possible! But I am the perfect mom for these kids, including all my mistakes, my screw ups, my successes. I get to be the perfect mom for them."</i>
Noelle	<i>"my main goal is to create a space where they know that they're loved, that they know that they can be themselves, and that I will be their biggest cheerleader... and I think that personal identity of being bisexual and seeing how miserable I was my whole life—just not able to be free to be me—has led me to want my kids to have a space where they just can be free...I'm not trying to dictate who they are or who they become."</i>
Rosemary Jane	<i>"I would say that I'm a really fun mom, but that doesn't mean I'm a good mom apparently, as I've learned. But I've always focused on fun and experiences as opposed to structure and stability, just because I don't have so much structure and stability so I don't really know how to give that to other people. But as much as I can, I can give them myself..."</i>

Table 5 shows that, though cultural or social expectations related to being a mother were experienced differentially, all participants could still easily name external pressures particular to the general experience of motherhood, even if they did not claim being impacted personally.

Table 5

Participants' Statements related to Mother Role and Identity around Perceived Expectations and Pressures

Pseudonym	Key Participant Quotes
Gal	<i>"you hear, like, women can't do it all. I'm constantly trying to resist that and push back on that. I mean, part of why I'm not a stay-at-home mom is because I think I would go crazy, but particularly in our country, I think we still don't consider that a job, even though it is. And I think people look down on it. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I do feel like that's in me somewhere too."</i>
Kaia	<i>"and his sisters—well, one works and the other two are stay-at-home moms— like, what their role of a mother should be is different than what I do or how I do it. And then he'll say things after his mom visits. And it's just, like, she hasn't had to work outside of the</i>

	<i>home her whole life...I think they respect me, but it also feels like there's a lot of judgment there on how I do things..."</i>
Heather	<i>"When we were living in Malawi, it was front and center because we were in the opposite of the cultural norm...there were a lot of questions in the workplace and with friends I met about our relationship and how we were, I guess, more equitable in who cooks and who cleans and who, you know, makes the money and who does whatever it is. So I think that's still in our relationship...but when it comes to taking care of the kids, I would say I'm definitely more the home caregiver."</i>
Laila	<i>"Being Black and in the South, it influences the way I have to parent them because at some point I realize that the world isn't going to keep seeing them as cute little boys. I have that stigma of being a single mom as well, so then balancing that...and then navigating the autism spaces, like, those are very different. I sometimes compare them to the bottle feeding moms and the breastfeeding moms, there are these competing communities and just figuring out where do we fit in?"</i>
Genieve	<i>"I don't really do the mom stuff the rest of the time and be a super, super, I don't know, stereotypical mom...I feel like the stay-at-home mom stuff is different...I'm the mom who would, like, like, run out of work, grab some Dunkin Donuts, drop it off at school, and run back to work."</i>
Koala	<i>"I have all these philosophies that I hear from seminars, from whatever, you know. It's like, all these ideals...that I want to be that mom, I want to be the one that's patient, that's kind, that's, like, modeling the right thing. And I feel like I end up falling short, left and right, every day."</i>
Ms. Piggy	<i>"I get frustrated when I see, like, social media and Pinterest-y kind of things. That's not me. I write notes to my little guy, but I'm not going to do the cutesy lunch. That's just not me, and it wouldn't...I don't know...I feel as a mom, it should come naturally to a point."</i>
Michele	<i>"I am not a big proponent of doing things that other people do. There's people who say don't curse in front of your children. I curse all the time. My kids know; it is what it is. Or, like, they limit screen time, right? Sometimes you hear other mothers and they're like, 'we limit our time on the 'system.' And I'm, like, what in the hell are they doing all this other time? I don't understand! Bake sales, you know, you have this cookie cutter mom who's, like, doing baking or not working, right? She's an at-home mom. That is not me and never will be. So I'm totally fine with that."</i>
Smart Lady	<i>"I think for me, as a mom, it's interesting because I'm not the nurturer in the sense that I'm here with them and cooking and cleaning or doing those stereotypical female mother things. Um, but I breastfed all of my children. I'm breastfeeding now and I care for them. Like, if they're injured, they're going to come to me, you know, and injured not just physically, but emotionally."</i>
Elle	<i>"I went into marriage really caught in this tension between, okay, now I get to be the first wave of a generation of college-educated African American women, but I just want to be a stay-at-home mom! And so there was a lot of tension...my ex-husband and I saw that narrative slightly different. And in the space of two weeks went from stay-at-home mom of four to single working mom of four...so that leads to a completely different narrative of what motherhood has looked like..."</i>
Noelle	<i>"it's not necessarily those external pressures that I feel like I have to push up against, um, it really has always been the internal ideal that I have in my mind of the kind of mother that I want to be and either being able to be that or not be that...it's always a measuring stick I have for myself."</i>
Rosemary Jane	<i>"there's just a lot of judgements wherever you go, there's a lot of rules. Sit here. Do this. Don't do that. And so I just wanted to give them options so that they could kind of choose their own ending."</i>

Finally, Table 6 provides a glimpse of participants' personal experiences of working motherhood generally, making clear that most already perceived significant challenges to work-life balance prior to the pandemic, often with repercussions for their own personal wellbeing.

Table 6

Participants' Personal Experiences of Working Motherhood Generally

Pseudonym	Key Participant Statements
Gal	<i>"I think I've struggled since day one with being a working mom, um, but also knowing I don't want to be a stay-at-home mom. I wish that we could all be part-time, because so much of my day is also being a mom, even when they're not here."</i>
Kaia	<i>"It's a balance for sure. It's a balance of working and providing, but also trying to be present and nurturing and, um, trying to give them the social and emotional love and growth that they need."</i>
Heather	<i>"I guess as a mom, it's been mostly about, like, working the whole time because my husband was in this educational track and had a lot less flexibility than I had. So it's been kind of juggling both for most of their lives."</i>
Laila	<i>"I have to work full-time because I have to pay for their needs and my needs. And then I don't get to go to daytime events or special needs things that they have in the community because it's just me, and I have to work. So I think that, socially, that has been isolating to say the least..."</i>
Genieve	<i>"I have a friend who, like doesn't even want her work knowing she had kids 'cause they're so not family-friendly. I've never had that. But it's also, like, I bring everything, like, I bring me, and I say, 'this is who I am, I have these kids, this is what I have to do.'"</i>
Koala	<i>"It's great if you make it through the day, and everyone is in bed, and all the kids are in bed, your work is done, and you can go to sleep. That's great, you know? So it's like, as a working mom, as a mom in general, I think you don't have time and you don't make time to reflect."</i>
Ms. Piggy	<i>"I am teacher-tired during the year, and I don't know, you know, I'm asleep at like 8:00 on the couch on Friday, so I try to give them the best of what I can, um when I'm able to, because sometimes I'm just totally exhausted."</i>
Michele	<i>"Everything's pretty easy. It flows. I've been doing it so long. To somebody from the outside, it probably looks very hard. Like, how are you doing all this? But I have just...I have a rhythm. I know how to do all this stuff. It's not hard work anymore."</i>
Smart Lady	<i>"If my kids had to describe, like, up until this point, what life has been like for me as their mom, I think they would say that, like, my mom is at work, you know, like, she's at work or she's at school...and I don't think they will have much more to say because I'm not really present."</i>
Elle	<i>"My company is so, no pun intended, but married to the image of a two-parent household. The woman takes care of all of the children's needs and the men earn the money. 'Well, yes, women, of course you can come and work in the workplace, but I need you to function like the men,' or 'I need you to function like the married women within our company who share parenting responsibility.' But that just isn't my life. And so that has consistently been a tension..."</i>
Noelle	<i>"having to balance all of those roles of, like, a working parent and being the second parent, like, there's no one to share any roles with. I feel like we're always on the move,</i>

always having to rush from one thing to another. In my ideal version, I always pause to give them my full attention and to really hear them, but I feel like I don't get to pause in those moments as fully as I would like to."

Rosemary "It's like survival mode, multitasking. I mean, I can't ever plan things out really because
Jane they just seem so daunting. I'll get anxiety about it if I think about it too much. Like, when I was pregnant, when I thought about, 'okay, how am I going to have a baby and work?' I would go into shock if I even thought about it. So I just have to block that part of my brain out and just kind of go on auto-pilot. And then things just sort of figure themselves out."

Presentation of Themes

As per Smith et al.'s (2009) recommendations for IPA data analyses, themes were constructed (see Chapter 2) that represented areas of convergence across all participants. However, as IPA philosophy regards experience as unique and particularistic in accord with idiographic principles, highlighting areas of divergence from what was otherwise more commonly experienced across the sample was also of concern. For the purposes of this research, given that differences at the individual level can be gleaned from the prior descriptions of participants' contexts, divergence was denoted at the subgroup level when individuals with a shared characteristic (e.g., race) diverged in a qualitatively similar way from others' experience pertaining to a particular theme. In this research, subgroup divergence was only found with respect to theme one and is discussed at the end of this theme. The following sections present and detail each theme. Participant excerpts are used to illustrate each theme.

Theme 1: Intensification of an Already Non-Stop and Exhausting "Juggling" Act

This theme indicates that participants largely experienced the initial phase of the pandemic while remote working and facilitating kids' remote schooling (whether on own or in tandem with others) as marked by a high level of intensity and exhaustion, though not entirely dissimilar to their characterization of work-life balance prior to the pandemic. In providing context for their lives generally, participants indicated that they had already

been feeling significant challenges in the area of work-life balance prior to the pandemic, thus the events of the pandemic served to intensify an already familiar and exhausting juggling act, but in new and unexpected ways.

Explication and Evidence of Theme

Comparison of each participant's pre and post-pandemic illustrations of an average day balancing work and home life responsibilities made clear that, for nearly all participants, the pandemic represented an initial interruption, and then acceleration, of an already very challenging and complex work-life balance. This was underscored by the fact that all participants indicated that they were the primary person responsible for the day to day operations of running their household, whether single, partnered, or married, including coordination, organization, and decision-making pertaining to family schedules, kids' schooling, extracurriculars, and many of the domestic responsibilities, on top of being the main or greater financial provider for their family.

In the following two excerpts, Heather, a married mother of two children and a Senior Director of Program Management at an international nonprofit, described what an average day looked like for her, first before the pandemic and then during it, providing support for the idea that the pandemic intensified what was an already highly orchestrated and busy daily routine. First, Heather depicted what an average work day looked like for her prior to the pandemic:

My company is based in downtown [name redacted], so I would drop the kids off at daycare at about 7:00 a.m., then I would drive to the train station, take a 40 minute train into the city, walk to the office, and then I would leave the office around 4 pm. So I would get to the office around

8:30 and then I would leave about 4, go back and get the kids at, like, 5:30 and go home. And then, you know, it's dinner and trying to spend a little time with them before bath and bedtime routine and then put the kids to bed, and then, yeah at that time, before the pandemic, my husband was in clinical rotations in the process of med school. So he was working at the hospitals. [] I would say he was working generally five or six days a week. And then he would also have school work, so he would go to the hospital and then he would come home. But he would have to study for a test or he would have something else. So, like, he would usually try to eat dinner with us, and then maybe when the kids went to bed, I had some time... But at that point, I was like, you're too tired to stay up to do anything, so you just go to bed. Yeah. So that would be a typical day.

Heather's depiction of her pre-pandemic work-life balance exemplified a kind of non-stop and highly coordinated activity, from early morning to late night, that was typical of those told by the other participants. Later on, Heather told the story of how the pandemic impacted the general routine in her household, which again, was very similar to the stories told by other participants in terms of the levels of intensity and exhaustion experienced:

So during that time, like, I was getting up at, like, five or six in the morning, trying to work before the kids woke up, and then I would, you know, get breakfast. And then my husband would get up, and then he would take the kids for a little bit, and then I would try to work unless he had class or a thing, and then I would watch the kids, and then he would

go to class. And it kind of went like that until bedtime. And then sometimes I would go log back into work to finish whatever I didn't do if he had a long day and I didn't get stuff done. So, like, all the lines went away. It was just, like, from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., it could be work, kids, school, or multiple of those at the same time. And it was just kind of like trying to fit in 8 hours of work in that time block with everything else in between. Um, and it was just exhausting and draining.

Koala, a married mother of three children who had already been working remotely because of her job in Informational Technology prior to the pandemic, was one of quite a few participants who used the metaphor of 'juggling' when describing what things were like in her household at the onset of the pandemic:

It's like crazy, I think, almost comical...it's just like, constant juggling, like, you know, in different rooms, and a lot of times it's just running around, like, be like, I'm like, helping my son do something and then my other son be, like, mom!!!!, and then, like, you run there and then having to, like, 'oh, no, no, no... I have a meeting now!'

Compare this to Koala's depiction of what an average day looked like for her prior to the pandemic, which can also be described as a highly scheduled and non-stop daily routine:

Okay, so an average day would be like getting up early, um, preparing lunch for my kids, and getting all my kids basically out of the door, dropping my two kids at one school in the neighborhood, walking them there, and then rushing to catch the train to go to my older son's school,

and we would always be late. [Laughter]. And then if there's meetings at the school and wanting to try to attend that in person, like keeping in mind when is my earliest work meeting...So keeping in mind when is my next meeting, like, how much time do I need to take the train back so that I am at my desk by the time my meeting starts, and then do my meeting, whatever, do my work, and then going back on the train to pick up my oldest. And then usually my husband can pick up the other ones. So, um, and then whenever they get home, then like, things are just crazy. Then you have to get whatever it is, if there's any after school activities, and then preparing dinner, bathing them, getting them to bed, right? And at that point, my husband is home, so it's like we always share responsibilities. And then once they're asleep, then it's like, okay, let me pick up where my work was [laughter] and, like, finish up what I need to do.

Participants also commonly remarked upon the added emotional impact during this time using similar words and phrases to convey the intensification of this “juggling” act, such as “extremely exhausting,” “terrible,” “ridiculous,” “panicking,” “traumatic,” “a shock,” “burned out,” and so on. For example, when asked to think back on how things shifted in her household, Michele, a married mother of two and faculty member in higher education, exhibited a reaction very similar to that of all participants in the sample in terms of what was both spoken and unspoken. Her words were interspersed with laughter and head shaking, and in this way typified the emotional intensity that participants

frequently paired with their act of continuous juggling, both through their latent words and in their accompanying physical body language:

Oooh, Lord. I think I have PTSD from it. I was about to pull my hair out, uh, because that second grade work was- it was a lot, and I wanted to know where the lunch lady was, I wanted to know who was taking the kids out for recess- it was a lot. It was a lot.

Noelle, a single mother of two children and a lecturer in Psychology, also characterized her experience in terms of juggling, becoming frequently tearful while speaking directly and poignantly to the role overload that she felt during this time:

So I already felt resourced to shift online as an educator, but I think the problem came in trying to juggle the role of educator simultaneously with the role of educating my children, simultaneously with the role of mommy, my children... all in the same time frame. []. So, um, there was a lot of shifting constantly, like, hour by hour, minute by minute, of the roles and responsibilities that I was taking on. I think that was the biggest thing.

Genieve, an Executive Assistant for the President of a philanthropic nonprofit and mother of three who separated and eventually became divorced from her spouse during the pandemic, described the emotional impact to her in the following terms: “I was, I mean, I was exhausted, right? Like, I’m still exhausted. Like, it’s really hard to have to, like, just be in so many places. But it’s also, like, I could only do what I could do.”

Notable Area of Divergence

Black/African American participants more commonly brought up feeling that stressors were significantly compounded by ongoing issues of racial violence in their communities catalyzed by national attention to death of George Floyd and many other Black/African American individuals at the hands of police. For instance, Michele reflected in depth on the ways that this added a significant layer of emotional stress at an already highly challenging time for everyone in her household, including herself personally and in specific relation to her role as a mother in having to simultaneously comfort and educate her young sons about the life-threatening potential of racial injustices:

With people dying, left and right, racial injustices that have been happening. I have not talked about race at all through this thing, which is very interesting for me, because that part of the pandemic was very hard. So just add that right there, too, just having those kind of conversations with my sons who are Black. And these are conversations about, you know, police pulling [*people*] over, you're jogging and you get murdered, like, those kinds of things all happened during the pandemic. And so on top of online learning, on top of, um, COVID, we then had to have heavy conversations about race and America, um, and what that was like. And so those conversations were pretty heavy. []. And it became very heavy in my house, and for my husband, so every time he leaves the house, I'm now— I mean, I'm always praying—so it's like extra praying, right, like if he gets pulled over, what happens now? Now he's fine. He's legit. He's an educated Black man. But no one sees that, all sometimes they see is the

Black skin. And so then my sons have questions. So my youngest, we actually had to sit down and kind of do, like, we watched some YouTube videos about Jim Crow and slavery and, like, those things 'cause they don't learn them in school. They learn about, you know, Martin Luther King, enslaved Black people, and Rosa Parks sat on the bus. That's about all they get. And so it's our job to kind of teach them a little bit more. And so when people talk about not wanting to teach, um, critical race theory, it infuriates me, because that needs to happen, it is a truth that has happened. Let's not act like it didn't happen. And slavery, and what happened, needs to be discussed. Do I think we need to stay there? No. But I think history is important because otherwise it will repeat itself. And so how do we not do that? And so it was really heavy. That was another emotional toll. At one point, both my boys are crying about, like, will they kill me? Right. So having to support them and kind of navigate that, and like, there's no guarantee for that either. We can't say you won't get killed, like, that's just not a thing. But do we have to teach them, like, my 13-year-old, he'll be driving in two years. And so having to teach him how to respond to police officers and to, um, just White folk in general sometimes. And even though they are privileged—I have a lot of educational privilege and financial privilege—my skin is still Black. And so that doesn't always mean anything. The education and finances doesn't always mean anything to anybody, because I'm also, again, not flaunting it. I don't run around like, hey, I have a PhD, everybody look at me! Weekends, I'm dressed

down, I'm not a professor, so no one knows. And I'm just a pretty down to earth person. That was a- that was a difficult piece throughout the pandemic. And so when you think about, you know, regular stuff, like, on the surface, COVID and online school and that, and then we had to add that to it, it was heavy. Very heavy.

Similar to Michele, the other three Black/African-American identified participants also discussed the ways that racial trauma and injustices compounded their already very high levels of stress at this time. For example, Smart Lady shared the added fears she harbored for her children because of their race, as well as her frustration with the educational system and national debates that had been prominent at the time of the interview related to critical race theory:

I feel like this is the age, especially with them being Black, I'm mindful that they, like, already have targets on them as African American, male children at that. So I'm always having to teaching them about just coping with how they feel. []. And I'm very much social justice oriented. I would also say I ascribe to critical race theory and things of that nature. And so I do not, do **not** think that the public education system in America addresses the needs of children of color. And so it bothers me that I have to depend on the system that I know wasn't built for my children.

Elle discussed the emotional impact and toll of racial violence as an inseparable aspect of her experiences, both in her home and in her workplace, that were then even further compounded by what she perceived as dismissiveness about the severity of the pandemic:

Then on the backside of what happened middle of the year. So, May 2020, you know, George Floyd. George Floyd is murdered on Monday, my son turns 18 on Wednesday that week. Um, my brother's birthday is the same day. So, he's, like, 41, and my nephew, who is now 12, they're here in town, so they pushed out past, you know, COVID. My sister-in-law is a nurse practitioner, so I'm like, I trust you if you're coming to my home, I know you've done everything you possibly can do to make sure you're not bringing sickness here. And so, we're having this beautiful family moment. It's the first time my brother and my son get to celebrate their birthdays together. And the first time where everyone was here but my sister, so my parents were all together in my new home. And now we're dealing with George Floyd and just kind of rip the band-aid off moment that was- and not just like- George Floyd is just the name that kind of triggers the waves, but the narratives and the stories that we've been living with and all of a sudden. And in my job, we do weekly devotional. And I was the devotional leader on that following Monday, after being on vacation for a week when all of that was happening and being able to come on Zoom and just say, 'look, I am not okay. I'm not. This hurts. This sucks,' all of these things. But I also recognize that I'm in a place that I get to be a voice. I get to speak for those people who aren't in the sphere of influences that I'm in. So even as it relates to the pandemic, my coworkers, the advisors on my team, you know, they appreciate, like, okay, maybe we go home for a little bit in March, but because of my science background

and I've already studied pandemics, like, 20 years ago, and saying, okay, we're overdue for a pandemic, global scale, we're overdue. So, for the last two years, I've been trying to figure out how to be ready for this. So, when I hear the whispers of it in 2020—January, February—my gears are like, okay, click, click, okay. So how do we need to be prepared? How do I need to be prepared for my family? How do I make sure that this is a safe landing place for the people that I love? But then talking with my co-workers and they're so cavalier about it, they can't even imagine that life is about to change. And so throughout last year, feeling like I'm caught in that tension, like, I'm in this world of people who, because of where they live in the city, they don't have to interact with Black people. Um, there may be one or two in their grocery stores, but they are positioned where the affluent are. And not that there aren't Black affluents, but they're not necessarily in those communities. And so there's a disconnect because I'm here. I see what is happening here, but when I hear you talk about it, you can't even fathom it. In fact, you have kind of like this cocky, cavalier—being rather dismissive. []. And there's this 'oh, ha, ha, ha, there's a pandemic out,' not a 'ha ha ha,' but just 'the media is just hyping it up more than it is.' But I'm like, 'I have a sister-in-law who's a nurse practitioner in Delaware, and before the pandemic, she would come home, wouldn't let her kids touch her, and she'd go in the shower.' She literally takes rubbing alcohol and scrubs her face down every day that she works. That's pre-pandemic. Amidst the pandemic, she's coming in her house and

going into her basement. She's not touching her own kids because she's watching people dealing with COVID and the way that their hospitals are stressed out. Just because this is your narrative doesn't mean that this narrative is false. And so that's now where I've been for the last year and a half.

Summary of Theme

Overall, theme one characterizes participants' experiences of remote working and facilitating remote schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of an already elusive work-life balance juggle. Participants' stories make clear that these mothers were already used to a high level of difficulty and responsibility inherent to their juggling act, but that the context of the pandemic added unprecedented levels of intensity to the juggling routine. In addition, Black and African American mothers in this research notably described their intensified juggling act as significantly compounded by heightened focus to ongoing racial violence in their communities catalyzed by the death of George Floyd and others.

Theme 2: Left to One's Own Devices, Figuratively and Sometimes Literally

This theme captures participants' experiences at the pandemic onset related to their children's remote schooling as mainly parent-guided, with either minimal or confusing direction from schools at least initially, resulting in them feeling largely on their own in navigating through this challenge. Additionally, the naming of this theme also incorporates the fact that many participants indicated having to use their own personal electronic devices, at least for some portion of time, while remote schooling their children, as well as often feeling overwhelmed and under-resourced related to the

device-based nature of remote schooling. These overarching perceptions were voiced by all participants, whether they described facilitating remote schooling for their children on their own (the case for all single mothers in the sample and several of the married mothers) or if they did so in tandem with a spouse, partner, or other family members. This also includes those participants who were also employed within school settings as teachers or school counselors. Most participants voiced these feelings with an attitude of understanding given the uncertainty that was experienced universally and were not generally critical of their children's teachers. However, in many cases participants either directly or indirectly conveyed criticism of school administration or systems generally when discussing their experiences of remote schooling, feeling that decisions made pertaining to school communications, issuing of electronic devices, expectations for completion of work, and other factors often left them feeling reliant on their own devices, figuratively and sometimes literally, in order to complete the tasks of remote schooling.

Explication and Evidence of Theme

Laila, a single mother of two young boys who worked in the public schools at the pandemic onset as a school counselor, vividly described her succession of experiences related to remote schooling from the time she first found out that her children's school would go remote and on through to her descriptions of a cacophony of emotionally-charged experiences. This longer excerpt encapsulates many aspects of this theme also relayed by other participants, including concern about devices, overlapping schedules, the limitations of device-facilitated schooling, and what she perceived as highly challenging and unrealistic expectations for her as a working parent, resulting in feelings of stress, exhaustion, and failure. Because Laila also worked in the school, she also described her

inside view of the differences in communication from the school to her as an employee versus her as a parent:

Working in the district you get the little announcements before the parents get them. And we got an email that was like, we're going to announce that we're going to shut down and we're going to figure this out. Basically, like, don't be alarmed. We'll send y'all info basically, when we know. And I was like, okay...[said with skepticism]. So we went on spring break the following week, we got these emails that were like, 'we're not coming back [laughter]...' basically they were like, 'we're gonna [sic] figure this out, we're going to be remote all these days.' It was just hectic. But for me, I was like, 'we can do therapy online, that's not new.' So job-wise, I was like, it'll be fine. We can do therapy online. But I had, you know, twins, one of my sons is in Gen Ed Kindergarten and the other one was in special education Kindergarten. And I was like, 'So how do we do school? And how am *I* going to do school?' Like, I remember that moment of panic of, like, how do I work 40 hours and do Gen Ed Kindergarten and Special Ed Kindergarten. And then the directions came out that we were going to use this little online platform, and they sent out all these schedules, that was like, from this time to this time, is this class, then it's this class and it's a break. Then it's PE, and then it's a break, and they were like, you—they wanted parents to be, like, present. And I was like, I have one device, like, for me, I had my work laptop. Both of my kids have, like, tablets, but they would really need, like, a laptop in order to

fully, you know, and I was freaking out about devices. Um, so then I was able to pick up one laptop from the school district. So that, okay now, we have another laptop. Their classes overlapped, of course, like, he has to be in class at this time and he has to be in at this time. And then if they did fortunately, have a break, then I'm working and doing therapy with my students, and they would come in and they're crying or fussing because they want my attention. And I just have to tell my students, I'm like, 'Listen, Miss [Last Name redacted] is at home and I have kids.' 'So you're going to hear my kids in the background.' And they were like, 'It's fine.' But I remember feeling like, if I can't do this, are they going to fail? Like, are y'all gonna blame me because I can't be in three places at once? And one of them, [son's name redacted], he's the one who's in general education. I have, I bought a desk. I found a desk at Walmart, and I assembled this little desk, and I put it in the room, and I put the laptop up there and set him in front of it. And I'm like, you have to just listen to the teacher. So if you need a break, say, you need a break and close the computer. He was pretty self-sufficient. But there was times where I'd come up there and he's under the chair, and just 'how long have you been under the chair?!' But his brother, who's limited verbal, you know, I'm literally chasing him around the house with this laptop. I'm like, 'look at the teacher, look at the teacher,' and she's trying to engage and I'm like, 'how long do we have to do this? Because he's not interested.' And I can't make him sit to stare at a screen. He doesn't understand. He's like, 'Why

am I doing this?' And she's like, holding up flashcards, trying to make him talk. And I'm like, this is ridiculous. We can't do this. And there were times where I was like, 'OK, we're going to try, but if after ten minutes, he's not attending, I'm shutting it down because I can't.' It was like, for me, that was the most stressful time because I felt like I was failing because I couldn't get him to participate. And then after a while, I was like, 'but this is foreign! He's never had to do school on a laptop.' He's never even used the laptop. And he's probably like, 'Why are you chasing me with this thing?' Because I was like, just sit down, and like, just say, dog. She's holding up a dog. Just say, dog, and he's like, 'Get it out of my face.' It was terrible. It was a disaster. My house was a mess...and [son's name redacted] is my one who's in General Ed, he did decent. He was tired, and I was exhausted. And I remember there was times where I'm just like, I can't. If my students didn't log in to their sessions, as bad as it sounds, I was relieved because I'm like, 'y'all probably need a break.' I'm tired of being on computers. My kids are tired of being on computers. That's our only interaction with the world is computers. So I had a new appreciation for teachers, especially Special Ed teachers. But I was like, I did not go to school to be a teacher. I don't know how to teach special education anything. And what am I supposed to do if he doesn't participate? And then I started thinking, like, 'and is he going to lose skills? And is he going to regress? And what does that mean? And there was just no communication with the schools as a parent. So I saw from

both sides, right? Like, I was an employee, and I'm getting these emails on the back end that they don't share with parents. And I was like, this doesn't seem right, like, the way we're handling this. But then, as a parent, I'm like, no one's talking to me about what to do with my kid and how they maintain skills at home. It was a disaster.

On the whole, participants echoed many of the same points made by Laila, especially technological frustrations and challenges because of the device-based nature of remote schooling. All participants indicated that use of devices and electronic platforms for their kids' remote schooling (e.g., iPads, Chromebooks, Google Meets, Zoom meetings) increasingly became the norm and expectation. However, first there was the challenge of procuring these devices, which reinforced feelings of being on their own and left to their devices quite literally.

Hence, quite a few participants indicated that they either used their own personal or work-issued electronic devices, purchased new devices or, similar to Laila, reported borrowing devices from their employer until school-issued electronic devices became available. For example, Genieve stated, "I had to buy [child's name redacted] a computer because his wasn't working, so I bought him a laptop." Michele shared that, "my youngest actually had to use this laptop, which is my business laptop. They were supposed to give him a Chromebook, it just never happened." Kaia, a married mother of six children who also worked in a school setting, stated: "I had iPads that were issued by the school and I asked my supervisor, can I use these for my kids to do work? And she's, like, sure no problem." Gal commented upon relying on the support of a family member

in order to rectify the lack of enough devices until her school later on issued Chromebooks for the 2020-2021 school year:

Even though my daughter wasn't, like, on Zoom, she still had stuff online to do. Well, so, we have my work computer that I'm on right now, my husband's personal computer, and, like, our phones. So, like, it was crazy. So, um my sister, who manages the finances for my family, or for my parents, ended up getting each one of my siblings and I, like, one iPad for our families to do remote learning, because I, like, [child's name], my daughter, was, like, on my work computer doing work, and it was crazy, and then, like I'm not working, you know.

In addition to feeling on their own in securing enough devices, participants also reported a wide variety of concerns pertaining to the device-based nature of remote schooling itself. These included frustrations pertaining to a general digital learning curve for themselves, their kids, or other adults who shared in the responsibilities; internet connection issues; difficulty getting school links to work; overlapping meeting times; screen fatigue; excessive emails; and more. For instance, Gal noted that even after receiving Chromebooks from the school for the subsequent school year, the challenges continued because of internet connection issues:

It got better for sure [*after receiving Chromebooks*], but then internet issues because we have so many devices on, and then we kept all getting dropped, and it was just comical. You have to laugh or cry or get really angry. And I was just, like, this is crazy!

Elle, a single mother of four children and Client Service Associate, commented on a number of issues in relation to her youngest daughter's remote schooling, including the internet connection issues experienced in her household:

So for the most part, okay, so pandemic hits their fifth grade. They're just sent home. So she's using the home computer to get some things done, but it's basically like, fifth grade, end of the year, it's a wash. I can't remember how we were trying to do education! 6th grade, they're like, okay, well here are Chromebooks. So you take your Chromebook home. It's like I have to make sure my WiFi, so now we're all on the WiFi, and so we're all riding it, the internet is spotty at times. And what do I need to do? Do I need to upgrade this or change that? Do I need to pay for a faster speed? Um, because now I've got five people on computers, five people on cell phones, and throughout the day, it's just any number of things.

Ms. Piggy, a mother of two boys and a Kindergarten teacher herself, commented on her feelings of "just kind of flying by the seat of your pants the whole time," both as a parent and in her role as a teacher:

So it was just we just kept getting phone calls. Um, but, like, with teaching, though, I feel like it was a staggered way of coming back to, like, we were allowed to have a couple of days so we could prepare, because obviously we had no idea how were going to do that [*online schooling*]. So just trying to figure out, what in the heck are we going to do with these Kindergarteners online for the rest of the year? And we had to distribute, like, computers to the kids. There was just all kinds of things

to work out. So we had a few days to help us with that. And the same thing with, um, with my boys, was we got back and we had the extra week added on [*for spring break*], and then plus a few bonus days so the teachers could figure things out.

As observed from the long excerpt from Laila, quite a few participants also remarked on the difficulty of getting their kids to engage in educational tasks through the screen, or what some referred to as screen fatigue. For example, in reference again to her daughter, Elle commented:

And then my frustration, particularly for her, is the school district's version of it was, you have to sit here and stare at this Chromebook for, uh, school started at 9 something ended at 4 something. So basically, a nine to five, you have to stare at this Chromebook. So there's a Zoom session, and then there's work you can be doing. But they police the kids so heavily, like, you can't even get up and go to your bathroom without, you know, you have to stay on the camera kind of a thing. And so [sigh] that was just hard to witness...

Michele reflected on the challenges experienced later on when her school district enabled a choice between returning in-person or remaining at home and engaging in the classroom through a virtual platform:

So live teaching, they would have each class, they would just sign on to Google Classroom, and the teacher would teach. And a lot of kids went—so I would say, like half kids went back to school and then half had her online. And so the teacher was in the classroom teaching the ones that

were in the classroom. It made it a little difficult because if my son had a question, he could raise his hand, but the teacher may not see it. And so then it wouldn't get answered 'til later. So a lot of times my husband and I had to be in ear shot in case he had a question about something.

Again, common across participants' experiences with remote schooling was the experience of ultimate responsibility for their children's remote schooling experiences (i.e., whether their kids attended, handed in work, made progress), even if sharing this responsibility with other adults. For example, of those participants who said their spouses or other family members took a significant or primary role in facilitating their kids' schooling, all still described engaging in behaviors along the lines of monitoring and overseeing, suggesting that they viewed themselves as primarily responsible. For instance, Genieve indicated that her ex-husband mainly handled their kids' schooling, but stated, "every so often I would sit down with the kids' computers and go through their Google classroom stuff and see what was missing and what wasn't." She later reflected that, "I couldn't be too picky about the quality of their work at that time, so just do whatever you need to do and just turn it in."

Smart Lady, a Mental Health Consultant and married mom of three children, described checking in on her spouse periodically, as she indicated that he was the main person responsible for the daily duty of remote schooling:

Basically, my children got really behind. They were doing virtual school, and it was my husband's responsibility to make sure they went to school, right? Make sure they did their homework, make sure they were paying attention. And what ended up happening was basically my husband didn't

take that seriously. And so there will be times where, like, I would just get up and randomly check. And he's supposed to be, like, monitoring them and he'd be on the couch asleep, you know? [laughter]. And the kids would be, like, on YouTube, but they're supposed to be in class. Um, so I saw a lot of that happening, or he wouldn't turn in their homework or have them even do their homework.

Kaia's discussion of what the remote schooling experiences were like in her household made it clear that, even though both her spouse and live-in aunt shared in the responsibilities, she still viewed herself as ultimately responsible:

Either they would do it on their own, or they would just wait for me to be there. So, like, if they knew, or if their teachers were having a Zoom meeting, um, you know I would teach them how to get on. For the most part, either my husband or myself would be there to kind of help them with it...um, and, yeah, if they could do it, they did it. And otherwise, they would wait for me to get back and oversee, oversee it later. []. But I think for the most part, I would be the one to make sure they're getting it done and staying caught up and getting things turned in the way it needed to be, yeah.

Ms. Piggy commented that, even though her then spouse facilitated much of the remote schooling at the onset of the pandemic prior to their separation and eventual divorce, she found it difficult to not involve herself, especially because of her experience as an educator:

I think the hardest thing was I had taught first grade for so long, and he was in first grade, and so I was trying to give advice to my husband about how Seesaw worked or how this worked, and he didn't want to hear it. So we really, like, we had to separate, like, he did not want me helping with school stuff—it caused arguments.

Another common frustration voiced in relation to the feelings of aloneness and stress undergirding this theme, was the perception that academic expectations at this time were often “unrealistic” because of time limitations on their end (i.e., feeling that the expectations for overseeing everything exceeded their time resources) or because of the digital learning curve or the limitations of device-facilitated learning itself. For instance, Rosemary Jane, a single mother of two and Accountant, described feeling extremely overwhelmed and that her children's teachers “were kind of getting on me” because she couldn't keep up with the demands of their remote learning. She also shared her views around the sudden digital learning curve for her younger kids:

It's like, suddenly you're giving these school-age children computers that they don't know how to use. And it's like, oh, just upload, scan in your homework and upload it to the FTP site. And it's like what? I learned that when I was, like, 40 or, like, 30. My eight year old doesn't know how to do that. Okay? We don't even have a scanner. Oh, just take a picture with your phone, right? He doesn't have a phone. I'm working. It was just kind of chaos.

Moreover, participants also voiced feeling frustrated that certain aspects of their kids' remote learning often did not make common sense, requiring a maximum of limited

time resources that seemed unrealistic on the one hand, while at the same time not valuing or better taking into account the resources and/or decision-making abilities of families in particular areas. For example, quite a few participants remarked feeling that they were well equipped to provide their kids access to exercise, either by taking them outdoors or doing a live alternative in their homes, in place of what was often dismissively referred to as “online gym” or “online P.E.” class. A few participants even described having to complete verification methods themselves because their children were too young to do so, such as completing online questionnaires related to the content of an “online gym” video or sending a report of what exercises their child completed, in order for their child to receive class participation points. Noelle commented feeling that remote schooling had been easier for her when the school sent home paper packets in the beginning, as it seemed to give her more control over when she would conduct their remote schooling because of conflicting commitments, as well as general technological and communication overlapping and overload:

I was more thankful when their teacher sent home paper packets and just said, get this paper packet done at some point, and then you're left to do your own thing. I loved that because I was like, great. We have tons of art stuff. We have tons of science stuff, like, I can have them both working on the same thing at the same time. That was actually more of a relief for me than the times when each teacher wanted to be doing independent things, because in those times when they wanted to do Zoom classrooms or do independent learning activities, it was me on my classroom, you know, here's this one Kindle with this noise coming, and this other Kindle with

this noise coming, and that kid is not, neither of them are big enough to, so it was, 'mom, I can't hear!' And 'mom, can you fix, they can't hear me! Ahh! So for me, personally, I liked it when I had more of a say in what that schedule looked like and I did not have all of these competing expectations from other instructors because it always fell on times where it was just inconvenient. It was either we were all on that at the same time or they would pick, like, during dinner and I'm like sitting here trying to cook, and then I'm getting interrupted by, like, 'mom, I have to do this!' or 'mom, I have to do that!'

Although Noelle was the only participant who explicitly discussed her preference for using paper packets, she was not alone in her feelings of technological and communication overload pertaining to the remote schooling experience. For example, Rosemary Jane and Ms. Piggy both spoke at length about feeling besieged by a proliferation of email and constant communication. For instance, Rosemary Jane commented vividly to her feelings of frustration with technological overload and other aspects of remote schooling as a single breadwinning mom:

I had hundreds of emails every single day, and a lot of them were from the school. It's like I couldn't even keep up with all the code updates and this, that, and the other thing. I just couldn't keep up, and I kept writing and telling them, like, listen, I can't keep up with this influx of information. I don't have time to read hundreds of emails, especially not when I get home. I remember writing just super frustrating emails just to their teachers, saying, basically that I give up, sorry, you're just going to have to

let them fail because I don't have time to do their homework and show them how to do it or teach them. And I was getting very frustrated because suddenly I felt like I was supposed to be the teacher and I couldn't be the teacher and also work. I just didn't have the capacity. I mean, they were always trying to offer help, but the help that they offered took my time, so it wasn't really a solution. It was like, oh, we can show you how you should teach it. It's like, no, you're not listening. I don't have time to be a teacher. At what time do I have? 11:00 at night when the kids are sleeping, right? I just don't have time. I don't know. I mean, even when I was here working, I found that just because you're home, I mean, it's more distracting 'cause the dog's here, and he wants food. And then this, and then that, and the cat killed a bunny, and then you can hear it squeaking, dying. And you're trying to fix that. And then, oh, the kids are- you can hear bullets in the other room and you're like, what's going on? And you realize your kid's playing Fortnite instead of being on Zoom and then the teacher's text messaging you because now they have all these apps like, oh, the helpful apps! Download this, this, and this. What if you have no room on your phone? What if you don't even have a phone? Yeah. So I had no room on my phone. So I was trying to figure out how to delete pictures, upload them to the cloud, download the app, get the app while being on a Zoom while hearing the bunny dying. While it was just like, chaos, I just gave up. At some point, I was just like, I give up.

Ms. Piggy provided a perspective of what it felt like as a teacher, conveying that she viewed the combination of device-based communication in conjunction with lockdowns as giving the parents of her students the impression that she was continuously available:

So I, you know, normally, with teaching little kids, I usually try to message parents, you know, as soon as they message, but during the pandemic, like when we were at home, it was bad. I was getting messages all hours of the day, and I had to have a cut-off time. So I had to tell my parents I will answer messages until, you know, maybe, like, 4 or 5:00, and then I have to stop, because...and other people I know, it was worse. They were getting, like, phone calls from parents, but that's why I don't give out my phone, my phone number. But people were getting phone calls...and I think parents were just so freaked out. The questions were just endless. And, you know, going back to what I was saying about trying to feel like a school mom. I really tried to make things as easy as possible as I could for my parents so that it wouldn't be as stressful. But sometimes it's just gonna happen. You know, like this year, my Kindergarten class was quarantined the third week of school. So the third week of school, we were already quarantined and trying to... I hadn't taught them how to use computers yet. I hadn't taught them so many things, so um, you know, I understand that there's going to be a certain level of concerns that parents are going to reach out to you. But I do think the boundary got blurred a lot

when we were all at home. You know, because it was just, oh, they're not going anywhere anyway, she's at home. I can just message her now.

Finally, of those participants who voiced feeling that the expectations for their kids' remote schooling seemed unrealistic, several connected this to larger issues of mental health, either for themselves or their kids. For example, Gal commented that she was more concerned for her kids' mental health at this time than she was their academic success:

I mean, in the scheme of things, I think they're both going to be fine.

They're smart, definitely on the higher end. But it's like, maybe some of those life skills, but more than that, it's the social that has really impacted them, and that's hard for kids. They both have anxiety. She has ADHD. I mean, those are- that's, like, way more important to me right now than the academics. And so that's been a struggle. It still is. I can still see it. So maybe not academically, but emotionally for sure, we're dealing with the impacts still.

Rosemary Jane, who earlier in her interview shared feeling that she was constantly bombarded with good intentions related to her kids' academics, conveyed a view that academics were less of a priority than her kids' mental health needs:

And so my kids were experiencing social withdrawal, anxiety. And we weren't focused on school at all. I wasn't focused on school or the learning—suddenly that just flew out the window and I didn't care. Yeah, because I thought that's not what's important here. What's important is my kids' mental health, like, they're depressed.

Michele also discussed the worries that she had for her child's mental health, as well as the ways that she felt essentially on her own in navigating it:

My second grader, he really struggled, like, socially. He is a social child, and his brother was here, but his brother would be on the phone with his—he has, like, a core group, like, three or four guys, and they just hang out and they stay on FaceTime all day. Not in school, but you know, he had his friends. Where my second grader, he had one or two friends- they didn't have phones, it's just not a thing for them. So he really struggled. And even just to hear him say, like, at one point, maybe I shouldn't be here. I had to deal with that, like, it was a lot. A lot. And I think it just- he missed the social interaction. And so I had to really kind of get on his level, have conversations with him and, being a therapist, you know, it makes it harder sometimes, like, you know, you can't counsel your own folks, but I just really- I got a little concerned. Um, I think we navigated through it, and he's- he's fine. He's fine now. And they're back in school. But just even having that pressure was a lot. And then I didn't tell my husband, because he just is a harsh guy, he's a manly man and doesn't always identify emotions as well or in a healthy way. And so I kind of kept that to myself and navigated that on my own, which is a little difficult.

In this sense, yet again, participants voiced feeling largely left to their own devices in terms of worrying about the social-emotional wellbeing of their kids during the pandemic, whether due to decreased social interaction or other factors. Consequently, in

specific connection with school expectations, quite a few participants voiced feeling that they had no choice but to ignore or “give up” when it came to many of the tasks and pressures they felt in the area of their kids’ remote schooling, all the while still worrying, like Laila in the long excerpt at the start of this section, whether they would be blamed if their children regressed academically.

Summary of Theme

To summarize, theme 2 draws attention to the ways that participants felt largely on their own in navigating the challenge of remote schooling their children, both in tangible and intangible ways. Additionally, the naming of this theme also incorporates the fact that many participants indicated having to use their own personal electronic devices, at least for some portion of time while remote schooling their children, as well as often felt overwhelmed and under-resourced related to the device-based nature of remote schooling. Concerns in this area extended beyond learning and academics, and also included feelings of aloneness in helping their children around social and mental health needs.

Theme 3: Merging of Work and Home Life as a Double-Edged Sword

This theme focuses attention to the ways that participants described the merge of work and home life in one physical space as resulting in both unexpected challenges, but also new opportunities and unanticipated silver linings. Thus, all participants were easily able to point out and discuss both positives and negatives to their ‘intensified juggling act,’ akin to a *double-edged sword*. Thus, this theme captures and incorporates the most commonly discussed strategies that participants used to manage and cope, both on a more personal level and specific to the tasks of remote working and remote schooling.

Strategies were either seen as having a positive impact, a negative impact, or were regarded as more complex in that both positive and negative aspects could be observed. This latter point underscores the complexity of participants' experiences highlighted through this theme in the area of work-home life integration because of the "merging" or "blurred boundaries" that participants frequently referenced. As a result, participants often highlighted challenges, benefits, and coping strategies all within the same stream of thought. Thus, in keeping with the spirit of this theme, discussion of the complexity of work-life integration as a double-edged sword is accordingly presented in a holistic manner.

Explication and Evidence of Theme

The most frequently cited challenge that participants experienced was an overall sense of difficulty with mental focus, attention, and compartmentalization of their work and home life spheres because of the merging of the two within one physical space, often contributing to feelings of cognitive overload and exhaustion. Speaking to her feeling of cognitive overload and emotional guilt, Heather again referenced the juggling metaphor, stating:

I would say, like, it got to the point where I was just really burnt out from, like, always thinking about, you know, work, kids, like, what do they need next? Like feeling guilt about not spending more time with them or giving them too much screen time or not getting out of the house enough because you're busy juggling all these things.

In most cases, participants generally indicated feeling more challenged in figuring out how to complete their job-related work tasks than they did with the remote schooling,

as the latter typically occurred at pre-set times during the day once device-facilitated learning became the norm. Moreover, work was viewed as a priority in their role as financial providers that could not be outsourced, whereas remote schooling involved other adults, even if not in the home to help (i.e., classroom teacher through the screen) and was not viewed as within their typical domain. Participants often referenced the challenge of trying to complete their own remote work tasks within the hours of a traditional working day or work week, and many resorted to chronically working at non-traditional times (e.g., early in the morning, late at night, on weekends) in order to make up “lost work time” during the week or to minimize potential disruptions. In cases where this was not possible, such as when meetings overlapped with kids’ remote schooling time during the week or when either their work or kids needed their full attention and the other might be a potential distraction, participants discussed using a variety of strategies, including making extra efforts to reinforce boundaries (e.g., verbally asserting their need for boundaries with kids or work colleagues, physically locking themselves within rooms—especially bathrooms—to complete work), giving themselves “time outs” to mentally recover, taking work calls while out on walks with children to try to toggle both at the same time, and so on. The following excerpts from participants’ experiences provide illustrative examples. For example, Gal commented:

So I would, like, sit on my bedroom floor to, like, take a call and lock the door. But then they would start, like, pounding, crying, putting their hands underneath the door. Ahh, ahh [makes crying noise]. So that was insane.

So I finally just said to my boss, like, I don't know how I'm doing this, and

she was just, like, just, you know, get it done when you can. So I just started working nights, like, in the early morning or at night.

In fact, locking oneself in rooms was a common method of trying to enforce boundaries.

Koala stated:

And then when I have a meeting, a lot of times, I kind of want to not have a lot of background noise too, so sometimes I have to go in the bathroom, in the second bathroom, and then lock the bedroom door and then lock the bathroom door so nobody can come in, because then there's, like, banging on the door, right, they're like, we need to go in!!!!

Genieve stated:

So if I was, you know, on a meeting, I would have to sometimes lock myself in my room and be like, 'do not come in! [*said sternly*], like, 'I don't care if you're like, like, you just have to do this!' So I depended on the older kid to know when the youngest had to sign in to Zoom meetings and he would do it.

Laila commented on the ways she gave herself "time outs," at the same time as recognizing that she largely did have to sacrifice self-care for the sake of caring for her kids:

I got to the point where I had to set boundaries just in the home, and I was like, 'Mommy's gonna have her quiet time,' and I would just go in my room and put on Netflix, and I would just lay there and watch Netflix, like, I just needed that separation of, like, I need to think [*laughs*] without hearing my name being called or... so yeah, a lot of that. But I think I

definitely had to sacrifice some of that to just keep them going and for them not to be worried.

Participants also commonly cited challenges of not having enough physical space or separation between working spaces within the home. This was especially the case for those participants who lived in densely populated urban areas in smaller homes or apartments. As a result, participants discussed trying a variety of strategies to either increase the number of working spaces or to make them more defined and concrete. This ran the gamut from rearranging furniture, repurposing rooms, building “learning corners” within rooms, having assigned seats for each child at the dining room table, having each kid work in their own room, or removing themselves or others from the common work area when things became too “chaotic.” In one particularly humorous example, Koala described her situation in what seemed akin to a game of “musical rooms:”

..it was constantly fluid. It was between the dining area, our bedroom, and what we call the music room or their playroom, and sometimes their bedroom. But the internet in their bedroom is not as good, so it just it just keeps on- I mean, we kind of start off with a set, you know, so typically my son will be in our bedroom, but then like when my youngest needs a nap, then he usually naps in our bedroom. So then he needed- so when he naps there, then my son needs to move to the music room. Um, sometimes if, let's say my middle son needs space, too, then it's easier for him to be in the dining room, because it's kind of closer to where I work, so I can kind of, like, quickly, more like, manage, go to him. But then also there's a noise factor. The only door that can close is the bedroom. The dining area

doesn't have a door. So I think we've heard people say, yeah, I can hear your husband teaching in the background in the kids' classes [*mutual laughter*]. So has to be muted a lot, which is probably a good thing anyway, because otherwise he would try to always talk out of turn. You know, so he's muted a lot, so he can be in the dining area. And then there's my husband teaching on the other side. And then there's me, kind of, like, in the middle. My office, I just set up a desk in the foyer area. And then, so that's kind of our structure. And also, like, my middle son cannot just be in a room with a closed door because then I can't hear what's going on, and I don't know what he's doing because he's probably not gonna be paying attention and be playing with his toys. []...it's like you're watching comedy.

Related to physical space, participants often referenced using a wide variety of both conventional and unconventional work spaces, both within and outside of the home, and for themselves and for their kids' remote schooling. These included basements, attics, garages, cars, by the pool, while at playgrounds or on walks, parking lots with Wifi (e.g., local public library) and more. Thus, participants either worked within their limitations or utilized their advantages, whether through repurposing rooms or relying on their access to certain amenities, such as enclosed yards or pools. For example, Gal stated: "Another thing I would do is get in my car and take calls. Or a few times I ran down the street on a call with kids chasing me, not even joking, to get away, to get away. Like, woo, this is crazy!"

Participants also highlighted requesting and/or asserting increased flexibility from work in order to better prioritize their kids' remote schooling, as well as increasingly adopting a general attitude of acceptance, resolve, and self-forgiveness around the reality of "dropping balls" given the sheer difficulty of the juggling act. Heather exemplified this well in discussing the ways that she felt she was "dropping balls" at work, as well as what she did to try to both manage and be ok with it:

Um, I made a decision to stop doing any work on the weekends, which I know a lot of people already don't do that, but I was doing that. So for me, it was a decision. So I just kind of told people, like, when I log off on Friday, I'll talk to you on Monday. Like, I'm not- it's my family time. I need to actually, like, see my kids and see my husband. And so, um, I definitely have let a lot of things, like, fall at work. And there was probably a good several months where I had anywhere between 500 and 800 unread emails in my inbox at any time. And I just had to live, like, I just got comfortable living, like, knowing that I was missing stuff. And in my team, I would be like, look, if you're waiting for something on me, let me know. I'll go find it in my inbox. But if it's something that I haven't responded to you, I probably didn't see it or forgot about it. Or it's like, 300 emails back. And I'm not going to get to it for a while. So, like, I know I'm dropping balls at work, I hate feeling that way, right? You never feel good about work when all you're doing is coming in and doing work that's overdue or things that are putting out fires and then not getting each other stuff, so there's that.

Genieve discussed feeling that her work became more flexible once she clearly and unabashedly asserted what she needed, much in line with her overall way of approaching working motherhood:

At that point, I think my job was very understanding. Like, 'I am doing remote school, like, I cannot be available at these times,' like, 'it's just impossible, it's completely impossible.' And then my assistant at work made sure all of my meetings were when I didn't have the kids, or when, um, just really was like, I would say, like, 'these are the days I have the kids, this is what needs to happen.'

Several participants also made the astute observation that young children do not have the ability to conceptualize easily between different roles that adults may have, especially when it comes to their parent(s), which they perceived as contributing to the difficulty of trying to work in the same space alongside their children completing remote schooling. For example, Gal commented on this when discussing that, because her children view her as the primary emotional nurturer, it made things difficult when her husband attempted to be in charge of the majority of remote schooling. Gal stated:

He was, you know, trying to handle the remote learning. But then it goes back to what I was saying before, but I'm still, like, the primary caregiver, I'm who they want to be with. So it was, like, that very hard dynamic of, like, he's here, he's not working. He's also a teacher, like, he wants to do this, but they want to be with me. So it was, like, so hard. []. And I would say, even with the teaching, there were moments where he's just like, because, again, my daughter like, they're kind of like oil and water

sometimes because they're so similar, he would, they would start fighting.

And then I'm like, okay, I guess I'm gonna take over teaching right now

for her, you know? So it wasn't just the emotional stuff I was doing.

Sometimes I would have to do the teaching too.

This was a sentiment echoed by many of the married mothers in the sample (see key quotes from Smart Lady and others, Tables 4 and 5, related to contextualization of participants' mother role and identity) and all of the single mothers, due to being the only parent in the household. Noelle also commented on this, at the same time as she also highlighted all of the additional roles that she felt she and other mothers took on due to remote schooling children at home, a refrain heard frequently from nearly all participants (for example, see excerpt from Michele under Theme 1):

There was no distinct, you know, demarcation. And children don't understand that, uh, they don't have that conceptualization, it's like mom's here, mom is supposed to be taking care of us. You know, I can't just say to my kids either, you know, as a mom who does want to be a present mom and isn't neglectful or abusive, I can't just say, like, 'you go do your own thing, five year old and six year old, you know, for 8 hours while I focus on my work.' []... and I added more roles than just mom'ing and educating them. I talked to one of my friends, I was, like, at the schools, they have someone who's picking up after these children, the janitor. That is the janitor's job, right? It's not the teacher's job all the time, it's not the student. The janitor is doing those things. The lunchroom staff is prepping the meals, like, even at school, the teacher is not responsible for every

single role and sort of, like, transition. And so really, during COVID, we took on way more roles than I think people really understood we took on, right? It was the janitor's role, it was the lunch lady's role, it was the child aid person who comes and helps in the classroom in addition to the teacher. Like, all of those were embodied by the person who was at home with them.

Noelle's reflections in this excerpt exemplified the added layer of challenge that participants frequently felt because of having to complete extra tasks during a workday that might be typically filled by other roles (e.g., making lunch, cleaning up, providing recess), as well as their role within the home space as their children's primary source of emotional nurture, regardless of whether or not other adult parents or caregivers were present. Relatedly, several participants also noted the challenge of having a lot of "down time" to fill for their kids, beyond just facilitating their academics, recognizing that school is a venue for learning, but also recreation and socialization. Gal and others, mentioned that filling this time, whether by "edutainment" or other means, constituted another challenge: "And so it was filling so much time, and obviously they can't see their friends, and so it was, yeah, and you know, there were time where we really shouldn't leave our house, so very stuck, you know?" Noelle also spoke about this in relation to the direct supervisory needs required of younger school-aged children:

Part of little kids is like, they really can't self-regulate for that long and so there needs to be a set of adult eyes on them to help ensure their safety and to make sure, you know, like, 'oh, actually, no, you can't use those scissors. How did you get those? No!' So it really was partly also those

safety things of both, whether it's a mom or an educator, as an adult, you have to kind of monitor what very young children are doing some of the time, you know, and if they're left to their own devices for any length of time, you know, then you have slime on your carpet and they're hacking things away with a box cutter that you didn't know you even owned! You know, so it's just, you don't really have the luxury of saying, like, 'hang out in your room for a couple of hours.'

To rectify this, participants described either digging into their resources or trying to be creative in coming up with ways to keep their kids "entertained" or "occupied" so that they could complete their own work tasks. As put bluntly by Laila, this included purchasing of "all kind of crap," such as scooters, trampolines, bubbles, and so on.

In addition to the strategies already mentioned that participants commonly used to navigate through the challenges, participants also indicated what strategies they used personally to cope with their high levels of mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion at this time. Many of the same strategies were recurrent across participants, such as drinking more than usual, sleeping more or less than usual, and exercising either more or less than usual. However, these cannot neatly be delineated as positive or negative, as participants' views on how these coping strategies served them during this time varied. For example, drinking more than usual was a coping strategy for several participants. However, participants varied in their views as whether this was positive, negative, or a mix of both because of the various purposes they viewed it as serving. For instance, Gal first stated:

I'm not, like, a big drinker, but, like, my husband and I were having a glass of wine each night, like, I never do that. That's something. And it just

wasn't even, like, of course, it was intentional, but I wasn't, neither of us really, like, paid attention to it until we were just really like, whoa, what are we doing? Like, this isn't us! And I think we were just both so freaking tired.

Then later on in the interview, in reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on her relationship with her spouse, Gal referenced the evening glass of wine a bit differently:

I have this vision of us, like, probably because we would share a glass of wine or something, that we would just be checking in more at night because [holds up one finger] there's nothing else to do, [holds up two fingers], we just went through, like, hell that day. So I was like, let's sit down and have a glass of wine. And I remember that, like, sitting in our living room just, like, laughing and, like, what the hell was that? Or, you know, what can we do different tomorrow? Or, um, so I definitely felt like we got closer because we just had more time, and maybe we didn't have more time, but maybe we have that same time now, but it's filled with other things or prioritized differently, honestly. And so I do miss that. I miss that.

Noelle also spoke about increasing her drinking during the pandemic, discussing her internal dilemmas with it as a coping mechanism:

I do think I probably, you know, on a typical year, I probably have a glass of wine on Fridays while we're watching movie nights, um, and through COVID quarantine, that was probably a nightly thing of, OMG, I don't

want to kill them, like, so I'm gonna have this glass. So I don't think that that was the best, uh, I was very cognizant of, this has to be limited even, because this could very quickly develop into a big problem. You know, I saw my husband become an alcoholic, and I definitely did not want to- I didn't escape that only to be that for my children. And I also, um, yeah, it just made me very, it was a very weird line of, like, I want to have this glass of wine because I'm super stressed right now, and I know I will feel slightly relaxed after I have this one glass of wine, and it will help me to get through, like, the rest of the evening because we still have more chaos, like, there's just no end to it, to that day. But I was also very aware of, okay, this is not the best coping mechanism, and it could very quickly become a big problem.

From her purview as an accountant for a whiskey manufacturer, Rosemary Jane spoke directly to her view of increased drinking among adults as a way to cope with a sudden and drastic change in routines:

I think it was super traumatic to kind of have the life, as you know it, just suddenly ripped away from you. Even if it wasn't like, the greatest life, it's what you know- to suddenly have all familiarity, even like with school or routines going to school in the morning, adults going to work in the morning. At the beginning, adults didn't even know what to do with themselves. I'll tell you what happened. Alcohol sales were through the roof. So you know what adults were doing? Drinking. That's what we're doing. There was no slowdown in my business. There was an increase. We

were making more whiskey than ever before! We couldn't make it fast enough! Gin sales were through the roof. So that's what adults were doing. They were drinking, if you just look at the statistics of what was happening.

Across the entire sample, many participants indicated that their own personal self-care habits had considerably decreased during the initial phases of the pandemic, particularly in areas of physical and emotional wellbeing. However, in quite a few cases, participants again pointed to the complexity of the matter, indicating areas of both personal self-care gains and personal self-care sacrifices, such as increased exercise but also decreased time for personal interests. It should also be noted that multiple participants described becoming ill themselves with COVID-19, with varying degrees of reported severity, or had children, spouses, parents, other relatives, or friends who became ill with COVID-19, and in some cases, died. Given this, the degree to which self-care happened, occurred, or was even seen as important within the larger context of the pandemic varied. For participants, the concept of self-care was a spectrum that seemed to fluctuate according to type of self-care and perceived degree of importance during this time. For instance, Koala commented:

So a lot of my self-care is going to, um, my doctor's appointment. So, like, I used to regularly go to a chiropractor or, like, acupuncture, so I was still able to do that. And I did it back then out of necessity. So whenever, like, I'm in pain and it's like, no longer tolerable then I just took the risk and go. So I was still able to do it. I guess I just took the risk, I kept my mask on and then, I mean, for a while they were all closed. But once they opened

up and then if I feel like I really need to go there, and then as they get vaccinated, obviously, and then I get vaccinated. So yeah, I would say, I mean, those were really my self-care. I don't have a lot of self-care [laughs].

Laila also reflected on the difficulty of self-care during the pandemic:

I realized all my self-care things were outside of the home, but they were things that I needed to do by myself, and I couldn't do that anymore. Um, so I know that I was a lot more irritable, um, during that time, like, through more of the unknown time. I was a lot more irritable. It was hard.

Michele also reflected on the ways that she found self-care difficult given her self-described extremely extroverted personality type:

I didn't see a lot of my friends, which was hard for me because I am social- *very* [her emphasis]. Emotionally hard for me, too. My husband and I didn't travel. We were home literally for a year, we didn't go anywhere. And so shifting from not being able to travel and not socialize, oh, I'm telling you, that's all part of the PTSD, like, I don't ever want to go back there. I don't think I can. My sanity won't allow me.

However, she also reflected on feeling that it was possible to find other ways to engage in self-care, even though it might not have been her usual methods of self-care:

I started taking more baths, listening to music, just stuff I hadn't done in a while. Like my kind of self-care—because I was traveling and stuff—that was my self-care, so I had to figure out other ways in the house, watching

a little more lifetime movies, things that I enjoy. Um, yeah, just kind of recreating or revisiting, I don't know, I call it 2.0, kind of, almost like remembering the things that I used to enjoy doing, and I decided to tap back into some of those.

Overall, all participants were able to point to at least one or more positive benefits, whether in personal self-care or other areas, that they directly attributed to work-home life integration, just as all had been able to point easily to various negatives. Positive benefits related to a number of areas, including for themselves personally; in their role as a mother; in their roles at their jobs, workplaces, or professionally; in their relationships with partners or spouses; and in their relationships with other friends and/or extended family. Moreover, some of these were cited as being in direct relation to their increased involvement in their children's education as a result of the tasks of facilitating remote schooling.

The majority of participants cited being able to spend more time with their family members as an area of gain, or *silver lining*, especially when doing recreational things together, whether cooking, engaging in exercise or recreational activities outdoors, being able to have more meaningful conversations with kids or partners, and other impromptu activities. These activities were often referred to as "the little things," but construed as important in building positive relationships. For example, Kaia focused on how picking up free lunches from her kids' schools ended up becoming an important time for outdoor exercise time as a family:

...the school provided- they actually did lunches and breakfast from the cafeteria. So that would be part of our routine. We would go up in the

morning, like, sometimes we would just go up on our bikes every morning and get the food. So they had their lunches for the day. So that was really awesome.

In Laila's case, she speculated on the ways that making special treats, such as s'mores, for no particular reason at all might serve as a relational touchpoint for one of her son's in the future, as well as helped her slow down:

So we were like, baking cookies and sugar cookies, and we were decorating cookies, and we were like, there was cookies everywhere. And then we were making smores. And it was a whole lot, just like those little memories that I think he's going to hold on to. And he's going to appreciate things that, like, if it weren't for that, I probably never would have done that. I just... I don't have time. We don't have time to make cookies. It's time to do this, this, and this. So it's helped me not be as rigid...

Gal described going on a drive, popping the trunk, and having an impromptu picnic, which she said was a memory that she would cherish: "One time we just, like, went into the valley and had lunch in the trunk. I just opened the trunk, I was like, 'yep, here you go, it's a picnic.' So, in those moments, I enjoyed it. Like, I did enjoy the simple stuff anyway." Ms. Piggy shared memories of her and her family members each strutting into the dining room for dinner to an individually selected 'theme song,' as well as starting a ritual of having everyone share one positive and one negative thing from their day:

We started, um, doing our— trying to think of what we called it—I don't want to say our highs and lows of the day, but basically, that's what it was. We each had to say the best part of our day and the worst part of our day. So that became a really good thing because, you know, when you're stuck at home all the time, trying to find the best part of your day can be difficult.

Elle talked about feeling like she was better able to have meaningful conversations with her kids, and at the very moments when these conversations might be most be most critically needed, especially with her teenagers:

So it's kind of like you got to, when you hear them ready to be talking and you need to know what's going on in their lives, you have to be able to stop what you're doing and engage with them fully so you can hear all of what they're saying, what they're doing, what's going on. I mean, the challenges with mental health in our children's generation, it's just heartbreaking. So that is a priority for me, that if my 16-year-old who rarely wants to talk about anything, when she's coming and hanging out in my office space and giddy and sharing, then I am not doing my work because I need to be paying attention to her in this moment because she's coming with what she has. I don't have the luxury of saying, hey, can you save all of that until 6:00?

Michele discussed feeling that she grew closer with her spouse in particular, as well as started a new exercise routine:

Oh, my husband and I actually grew, I would, say closer. We spent a lot more time together, and it was actually nice. At one point we had looked at each other, and we're like, well, thank God we actually like each other. Yeah, I love you, but I got to like you to kind of sit up in here every day, all day. []. We would get out and walk after school, usually set aside a time, like 2:30. I think they were done with school, like two, and then we would either walk together as a family or just my husband and I walked. Or sometimes I walked by myself just around the neighborhood and also just to get out to get some fresh air. And that became a thing for my husband and I. We ended up starting to walk about two and a half miles a day. Um, that's where we had to get rid of some of the weight. [*Laughter*]. So we have probably been doing that now for the last year, but it was created, you know, through the pandemic.

Smart Lady shared feeling that, even though her relationship with her spouse was strained, they did find time for sexual intimacy, laughingly gesturing to her newborn son as evidence, as well as had more opportunity to talk and connect: “we had another baby, so we got closer [*laughter*], and, you know, honestly, I think we had more time to communicate and talk about things and memories and just even the meaning of life and what we want out of the relationship.” She also discussed feeling that her own identity of a mother had improved because of being able to be home and spend more time with her children:

Um, when the pandemic happened and I had to come home, that was the first time that I actually had been at home with both of my kids, like,

nurturing them, cooking for them, teaching them. []. With the pandemic, I realized that if I plan really good, I can do these things, like, without him, without anybody. I could get it done. That was when I had two kids, though. Two kids, we can get it done. You know, I can separate a child if they want to argue, we come back together. When we make sense again, we can work it out. So I had this sense of, like, my sense of being a mother really improved.

Although most participants indicated feeling that they had little time to reflect during the pandemic (this was especially noted as part of member reflections), some found ways to do it during the moment. For example, as mentioned earlier, Gal shared that connecting with her spouse at the end of each night, often with a glass of wine, became an important way of reflecting on the days' chaos. Koala talked about even the chaos of this time itself as one that her spouse suggested she would eventually likely miss:

Obviously, they were definitely stressful times, but it's my husband who always thinks about it, like, you're going to miss this time, because this is such a unique time that I don't think is going to repeat again.

Some participants described not having to commute or be around coworkers physically as benefits that helped them be more productive and accomplish more in both work and home spheres (especially if, or once, their children returned to hybrid or in-person school with masks). They indicated that these changes gave them the feeling of increased control and autonomy over their work day and decreased interactions with coworkers or supervisors allowed them to better focus mentally. For example, Michele

indicated that, for her, not having to commute was a major advantage, and in fact, shared that she eventually quit her job at her university in favor of a teaching position at another university that allowed for more flexibility. In addition to feeling relieved to ditch her commute, Noelle also discussed feeling that, as a single mom, she learned that if she managed her time well, she could get more things done around the home between her work tasks (e.g., cleaning, laundry), as well as be more productive without “water cooler” time with colleagues:

I was able to take advantage of all of these little pockets of time in my home. That as a result of that compiling, sort of taking advantage of doing home things in my home space, instead of gossiping around the water cooler or instead of talking about some random crap with people at work.

Elle unequivocally voiced feeling that, for her, the merging of work-home life had yielded more advantages than disadvantages. She indicated that increased flexibility to work from home was something she had repeatedly requested to help her manage things better as a single mother, but had been denied her requests given what she described as a very traditionally oriented work environment. In this longer excerpt, Elle described how, for her, long-simmering frustrations pertaining to these expectations came to a boiling point just prior to the pandemic, and then suddenly, due to the pandemic, her wish to be able to work from home was granted and what this had meant for her:

My company is so no pun intended, but married to the image of a two-parent household. The woman takes care of all of the children's needs and the men earn the money. Well, ‘yes, women, of course, you can come and work in the workplace, but I need you to function like the men,’ or ‘I need

you to function like the married women within our company who share parenting responsibility.’ Um, but that just isn't my life. And so that has consistently been a tension problem over the last couple of years. To the point that January 2020, I'm asking to work from home a couple of days a week, and I get, ‘working from home is a privilege, not a right.’ So that is literally the conversation I had with my boss in January of last year. So January 2020, I'm leaving, the house it's dark, I'm coming home, it's dark. I'm pulling out of my driveway, February, crying ‘God, you just gave us this beautiful home!’ Literally. The apartment we lived in in 2018, 2019 was 1100 square feet. Started 2019 with a car accident, was out of work for six months, got back to work. And the apartment complex where we lived did renovations and jacked the rent up by, like, 40%. I'm like, I'm not going to pay this amount of money for 1100 square feet. Let me try my hand at buying- let me just see what happens if I try to buy a house. I tried the year before and was told because I just switched to part-time work that I wasn't going to qualify because I needed a two year work history with part-time work. All things fall into place, and I buy a house in November. We moved in November 2019, 2200 square feet, so literally double the footprint. So come January, I'm like, I leave the house it's dark, we come home it's dark, and I leave the next morning, it's dark! How can I not be in this beautiful house you just gave me? And then 45 days later, I haven't left now [*Laughter*]—well, yes, I've left—I have loved it! So what I realized probably was, in the first 30 days, was I always wanted the job

where I got to work from home **and** be around my kids! So now I get to be productive because I'm contributing to society, and I'm also being, how I learned to say, 'I am being productive, I'm contributing these people to society! And if you don't want them to burn down the whole world, please let me spend a little extra time investing in them while they're young!' []. My job itself is- even when I'm in the office- it is remote work because we work through a Citrix desktop, secure desktop. And so even though I was driving to go to the office to log in, I can log in from literally anywhere and still do the exact same thing that I was doing there. Which is why I felt like I should be able to work from home occasionally if I need to, if a kid has a doctor's appointment, I shouldn't have to take them to the doctor, get them back to school, come back to work, go home. []. So it just felt liberating and freeing because we just had the conversation that working from home was a privilege. And now we're all working from home and shame on you for trying to keep me from being able to do this! I love it this way and you'll never get me back in that office! [*Laughter*]

In addition to discussing her preference for working from home because of the flexibility it afforded her, Elle also discussed at length the difficulties she had experienced in her office environment because of frequent experiences of marginalization as the only person who looked like her who was also a single mother:

I got to be careful how I say this, but the easiest way to describe it is a White evangelical environment, and I'm the only person of color. Well, no, there's another person, but she's like an immigrant from another

country. I'm the only American person of color in our office, um, and so, but everybody's nice. It's not a cantankerous or contentious environment, for the most part. []. Um, now I work with people who I know want to be better. And I work with people who I think are still just a tiny bit clueless. And I'm only giving them a tiny bit of cluelessness, because at some point when it's willful cluelessness, then are you really clueless?

Commenting on exchanging her office-mates for her kids, Elle stated:

I feel like I was given more than I lost by leaps and bounds. Um, I love having great conversations with my kids, um, that timeframe, my oldest was away at college, it's the season of life, there's nothing wrong with that, it's just we didn't have that anymore. My son- he's walking through now-I love my conversations with him. He's a bit of a knucklehead, but he makes me laugh. []. So I look at this time, and there's not much, if anything, that I can recall that I feel like I've lost, aside from my connections with my co-workers, like, that is the part that's gotten thin. But I've gained so much more from being able to work from home versus having to go into the office.

It is notable that few participants explicitly discussed positive benefits in the areas of personal leisure, such as engagement in personal hobbies/interests or taking up new ones, perhaps with the exceptions of Kaia (e.g., paddleboarding) and Michele (e.g., new walking routine). In fact, Noelle explicitly made mention of feeling that the experiences of breadwinner mothers were quite different from the prevailing perception fueled by social media that everyone was learning new skills:

I certainly did not have, you know, for these single people or these partnered people who are like, 'oh, I took up violin, and I learned this new skill.' Yeah, that did not happen for those of us breadwinners. If it did, don't tell me!

However, several participants, including Noelle, discussed feeling that, once they had a better handle on things, they were able to find a routine and gradually felt that their personal stress levels did decrease and were better able to enjoy moments they might have otherwise missed. For example, Genieve stated that, for her, "go mode" eventually stopped, especially after no longer having to do subway commutes:

I think that there were so many ways that I got to see my kids grow that I wouldn't have normally, right, like, I would have been at work every single day. So getting time to spend with them and actually help them with stuff and talk to them during the daytime hours and not just be like, 'okay, I'm home, time for dinner, let's go, time to go to bed.' They would call it, oh, my gosh. What is it?...not mom zone... Oh, it was always mom's in "go mode," like, I would come home from work, and they're like, 'okay, mom's in "go mode," because I'd be like, okay, we have to eat. We have to do this. You have to clean up. You have to get your pajamas on. You have to shower, c'mon, you have to go to bed, you have school in the morning, and, like, [ex-spouse's name] and the kids would be like, 'mom's in "go mode.'" And go mode stopped [*laughter*]. You know, there's definitely....It wasn't like that, we have to do this, we have to do this, we

have to do this. So I think being able to slow down with the kids has been amazing, right.

Another notable area of perceived benefits concerned exchanges of learning, whether on their part or their kids' parts, because of having increased insight into each other's experiences during the day. Several participants discussed feeling that they gained a better window of understanding overall into their kids' academic levels and learning styles because of remote schooling. For instance, Koala discussed feeling that, not only did she get insight into what her children were learning, but also learned strategies that might help her be a more effective parent from watching her children's teacher's on Zoom:

You know, had it not been because of that time, you only get reports, but you never, like, sit in the class, right. Like, I can't, I mean, my daycare allows you to sit in maybe for half an hour, like, you know, if you want, but still, it's not the whole day, you know, whereas I think, uh, yeah, because I have to sit with my middle son, learning the alphabet, the sound, and the motion, like, learning racial justice and equity, you know, I hear it firsthand how do they teach this, and what language do they use, how are the teachers dealing with my son talking out of his turn, or you know, in a more, in a kinder way, going back to the parent thing, whereas I think my method is to always yell at first, it's almost automatic, like my instinct, even though I don't want to, I end up yelling because I'm so frustrated. And obviously the teachers are different, this is [sic] not their kids. But still, I think it was such a model to see, like, oh, what language can you

use? Or what distraction method can you use? What method can you do to address it? That's what they do in the classroom, right, so I got insight into that.

Alternatively, a few participants focused on the ways they felt their *kids* benefited because of having an increased window into what they did all day in their role as workers. For example, Genieve discussed the benefits of including her kids in her work activities:

So, you know, they see me actually working, and I explained to them more like, what I do because I feel like, 'oh, I have to do this project, this is what it is,' and they see the stuff, and I show them, and I've asked for their advice on stuff, which is nice. I'll be like, 'oh, these new logos came in, which one do you guys like? What do you think we should do here?' And I get to show them more things that they wouldn't have seen with their own eyes had I been in the office. So, I mean, those are good parts. It's kind of the beauty of the chaos.

Gal also felt that, even though quite difficult, working from home with young children present, especially as a woman, ultimately provided an important example for her kids (i.e., role modeling herself as capable, competent, complex, and even having other roles outside the home, thus combatting gender role norms and stereotypes). These opinions were echoed by several other participants. Concluding on this note, several participants spoke about the increased confidence they felt in themselves when realizing that, though quite difficult, they were able to continue juggling it all under great duress. This will be explored further with respect to Theme 4, as it often coincided with their perceptions of

themselves as breadwinners. However, as stated by Genieve, and echoed by others in a variety of other ways, “I think it was a really trying year if I look back at it and I remove myself from the situation. Um, but I have felt more proud of myself in the ways of being able to hold it all together. [] I have learned that I could do a lot more than I think I can *and* that I could ask for help. As a working mom, I could ask for help at work, I could ask for help with my kids, I could ask for help for anything and that people are able and willing and want to help.”

Summary of Theme

In summary, this third theme focuses attention to the ways that participants described the merge of work and home life in one physical space as resulting in both unexpected challenges and in providing new and unanticipated opportunities. Thus, all participants were easily able to point out and discuss both positives and negatives to their ‘intensified juggling act,’ akin to a double-edged sword. Strategies and coping skills enacted by participants to manage challenges were also perceived differentially in light of the larger pandemic context.

Theme 4: Ambivalence about Breadwinner Status

This theme reflects participants’ mixed feelings and perceptions about their status and role as household breadwinners, whether married, partnered, or single. For most participants, these feelings came to the forefront during the pandemic because of increased role responsibilities, financial stressors, relational issues, and other factors. All participants identified as necessary breadwinners in their households, and all but one had had already occupied this role for a sustained period of time prior to the pandemic. Although participants’ spoke about their experiences as breadwinners in a variety of

ways—self-perceptions, the way others viewed them, or the impact they viewed this role as having on others—a commonly observed attribute of their linguistic descriptions was like a back and forth pendulum swinging between what can broadly be characterized as positive emotions, feelings, and thoughts associated with their breadwinning role and negative or pessimistic feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Thus, at core for many participants when thinking about themselves as breadwinners appeared to be a swinging pendulum of internal mental dialectics that was often fueled by the incongruence between internal and external perceptions of themselves, feelings of chronic exhaustion due to their role juggling, and their conflicting experiences related to larger family or social role expectations.

Explication and Evidence of Theme

On the largely positive side of the pendulum box, breadwinning was most frequently associated with feeling empowered, capable, or confident; providing an avenue for personal and professional growth; living out of social values passed on from parents or mentors; and setting an example for children. On the negative side of the pendulum box, breadwinner role experiences were most commonly associated with feelings of guilt (i.e., questioning if they were doing a “good job” as a mom); being chronically overwhelmed; poor work-life balance; having little time for personal interests, ambitions, and their own leisure; challenging the ability to be relationally “present” with children and/or relationship partners; and contributing to conflicts with partners or extended family members. For some, the oscillations were more self-evident and directly claimed, whereas for others, even if they overtly claimed their experiences as

more positive or more negative, close analyses of their statements still evidenced internal ponderings, questions, or uncertainty towards the other side of the equation.

For instance, when asked to share about what it had been like for her as the breadwinner both in general and during the pandemic, Gal first shared the more positive aspects of herself as the breadwinner, but laced with some hesitation and uncertainty:

Um, I mean, part of it is empowering. I don't really feel pressure, you know? Like, sorry. My [*Microsoft Office*] Teams. I turned off Teams, and it's still... people bothering me. Um, yeah, I'm proud. I feel like it's empowering. I've never felt pressured, like, oh my God, it's all on me. I don't know. That's, like, never really crossed my mind.

Then a few minutes later, Gal stated:

I wish I could work part time. So then that would mean I'm not the breadwinner. So yeah, and it's just because I want more time with them... and I want to... I mean, our house and life is just, like, so crazy. It's crazy. And I just wish I had more time to get a handle on things. So yeah, I wish it wasn't me, even though, of course, my head is, like, 'but you're resisting!'

Later on in the interview, Gal shared the following in terms of its impact on her spouse:

I think, because I have such a flexible job, case in point, I'm talking to you right now, and I didn't take time off, that's hard for my husband to see. Like, you're making more than me, but, like, you can kind of do what you want, you know? And so I think there's, like, jealousy there for sure.

At the end of the interview, Gal circled back again to these same conflicting thoughts related to what it was like to be a breadwinner, summarizing her perspective as follows:

They are like, I've always known that they were, like, my main priority, but it's just been, as hard as it's been, I don't... I haven't changed my mind on that. They still come first. They'll always come first. Really, nothing else can even come close. So that was just, like, illuminated, and I just feel even stronger in that. And if I can continue to be the breadwinner, and that can still be the case, great. And if that has to change so that they continue to be my main priority, like, I hope we can make that happen, but I don't see that happening right now or anytime soon. I mean, I think I'll always have more earning potential, so that's probably going to be how this is. Um, and I think I'm a good mom, I work my butt off, even though I just told you, like, I didn't think I was doing anything well. I still know, like, I'm a good mom. Like, I feel very connected to them. I always have their best interest in mind, I mean, they're always on my mind. So, yeah, I don't know. I think if I'm being honest, if my kids understand it though, I don't talk about, like, I don't say like, 'mom makes more money.' I never said that. If they get that, like, great, I want them to look up to me. I want them to know, they have a strong mom who can be a good mom and also do good in the world. So I like that. I think if I'm looking at, like, the greater community, I... again, I'm proud of the role that I play and probably also

jealous of people who don't have to play that role because in my mind, they probably have more time, and maybe they don't.

Heather exhibited a similar oscillating dynamic in her thinking about what it was like for her in her role as the family breadwinner, especially after her spouse began a career path towards becoming a doctor, but did envision that eventually she would no longer have to be the necessary breadwinner:

I think I've made more than him my whole career. But there was a time where we were more equitable in terms of our contributions and income and stuff. Um, when he started med school, or started trying to get into med school, he took a job as a scribe, which is- it was a big pay cut. []. So I think the weight of knowing I was providing for the family, because I would say when we were more equitable, we didn't have kids. So it was, like, it wasn't as big. And there were a couple of times when we did not have a lot of money, and we were on food stamps for a little while, and we definitely had the part of our lives where we didn't have money. And then since we've had kids, it's been primarily me working and making the money. I have a love-hate relationship with my job. I really love the work that we do, and I love the people who are in the field doing it. Our head office is a bit toxic, and I don't like working with a lot of the people I work with in the leadership team of my organization, which is sort of frustrating, and I probably would have left, but I have five weeks' vacation every year, I have really good benefits, and they're really flexible with me. So it's definitely... it was a conscious decision to stay working where I

am, because the priority was the family and getting my husband through med school. []. And so I knew that, like, I was still going to be the primary breadwinner, and I still was going to need to have a job. And this job does have flexibility. And there are parts about my job that I really like, but it has also been, like, a very stressful thing at the same time. So, yeah. I'd say I'm definitely aware that I couldn't just leave my job because we don't have, like, my husband doesn't have the opportunity to make more than he's making right now as a resident because it's a set pay.

In terms of how she felt being a breadwinner impacted how she viewed herself and in her relationships, both generally and during the pandemic, Heather reflected:

I mean, I definitely have always been, I guess, somebody who, like, wants to feel like I've accomplished something or I've, you know, been successful, um, you know, valued independence and hard work and things like that. Um, and I think, like, there's definitely a level of pride that I've supported my family through all these things and do feel like I've accomplished a lot in my career. And I'm proud of the work that I've done [laughter] to get there. There are definitely times when, like, my husband wasn't working, and that was, like, a really big... He's always been very supportive of me, but I think it's more affected his own view of himself that he can't provide at the same level or that he's, you know, doesn't feel great about, like, or that he didn't feel great about where he was in his career. []. And obviously now he's becoming a doctor, so that's changing

because he did find the path. But I think it was definitely a big role in our lives that, like, the dynamic between the two of us.

For Kaia, becoming the family breadwinner was a matter of necessity after her spouse had a life threatening motorcycle accident many years prior to the pandemic, with a long road of recovery. Her newfound breadwinner role at that time was a matter of family survival that endured after her spouse was able to begin working again, but in a limited capacity, and therefore largely viewed through the lens of care and commitment. However, she did indicate that it had contributed to some stress for her because of gender role expectations harbored by her spouse and his family (see Table 5 as well):

So during like, almost initially after his accident, I went from working part-time to working full-time and also started private practice with another company. And I just worked a lot. And I mean, I felt like that's what I had to do to have what we needed to just live and survive. []. I would say I felt a lot of stress and pressure to keep working and work as much as I could. But I think it was always a tension with my husband because he's, like, I want you home more. But I'm like, 'I need you to work more then if you want me to be home.' So it's always that kind of tension and struggle. But I think we just- we made it work. And with having my aunt there, he was able to work more [*during the pandemic*]. So I guess I always felt like stress financially and not able to do what I really wanted and kind of being stuck in, like, whatever- I mean, I always

try to make the best of it, but not feeling the freedom to do what I really wanted to do, which is private practice.

Koala did not believe that her role as the breadwinner made any difference to how she or others viewed her, but explained a journey of arriving to this point of resolution because of how this went against cultural norms of her country of origin:

...well, it used to be that I think before I got married, I wanted to, I guess the people that I look for are people who make a lot more money than me, like lawyers, doctors, and whatnot, you know? So it's almost like when I met my husband, we met on a mission trip and, and this, well, I guess, sorry if this is, like, bias, but I think I grew up from a nation, country where those are the things that you, that you're, like, the culture shapes you to be, right, from Indonesia. Like, if you're a graduate of U.S., if you went to Ivy League, that's kind of like, wow. You know, like if you can marry a doctor, a lawyer, and have a huge- that's the aspiration of a lot of women, particularly in Asia, I should say. I couldn't speak for Western women probably. Um, in Asia, if you can marry someone who's really wealthy or make a lot of money and do nothing and be a housewife, that's like your dream, not your dream job, but your dream, I guess, you know. And so I think, yeah, when I met my husband, I remember thinking like, you went to where? Brown? Ivy League? But you're a teacher? At a public school?! And I couldn't put the two and two together. And I thought at first maybe this is just temporary, but no, like, he loves what he does, and

he's passionate about teaching in the public school, not in the private school, because that's where equity is. That's how you make an impact. That's how you make a difference. And, of course, that's all driven by our beliefs, you know...

Later on in the interview, Koala reflected that perhaps the influence of traditional gender role norms had been present in interactions with her mother:

I mean, my mom has asked several times, I guess, maybe she still kind of holds the view of, like, can you just not work? Um, kind of like in line with that traditional view that, because she didn't- she stopped working when she got married, not like when she had kids. And I think it's because, I think the view that my mom and my dad has, at least back then, I think probably their view is changed now, is that women stay home and take care of the kids and men work and provide for the family. That's their view. So I think when my mom was here helping out with me, you know, I think several times she kind of hinted, oh, can you just stop working?

For single mothers in the sample, the breadwinner role was viewed without equivocation as a necessity that often limited their choices. Similar to the married mothers, their reflections about themselves as a breadwinner were also indicative of a fluctuating internal mental dialectic. For example, in thinking about how being a breadwinner influenced how she viewed herself generally, Laila reflected after a long pause, "I have to work twice as hard," then went into further depth in reflecting on the ways it has impacted her, both positively and negatively:

I think that, to some degree, it's made me be a whole lot more independent. And I think even when I look to finding a partner, I think that that sometimes intimidates future, like, potential partners because it almost seems like, 'well, you don't need a partner because you work full time, you take care of your kids,' and you know, it's just sort of where I'm at in life. And I've seen that just even women, I think, who have advanced degrees, sometimes that can intimidate future potential partners. I've seen that, that it makes it a little bit harder to date in the sense of, like, I don't know, I think it just takes a certain type of man for me to feel comfortable, like he can add or bring something in. I would absolutely love to work part-time [*laughs*] and, you know, not have to be the breadwinner. I'd be comfortable not doing that if it meant I could spend more time with my kids...

In specific reference to how being a breadwinner during the pandemic influenced her view of herself, Laila concluded:

I think owning that, like, there was an element of strength to get through the pandemic as a single mom of two special needs kids. So for me, trying to give myself a little bit of credit that, like, that was hard, that was a disaster. Nobody knew what they were doing. So taking that pressure off that, like, I should have done it better, or I should have been more organized, or I should have had a whole school set up upstairs. So giving myself a break and acknowledging that, like, I did do a decent job, and

that was okay. And it's okay to not have done it perfectly 'cause no one knew what they were doing once everything shut down.

In the following longer excerpt, Noelle reflected in depth on her experiences as a single mother breadwinner as associated with constant internal conflict in relation to the choices she can and cannot make, all while maintaining awareness of her relative privileges, including throughout the pandemic because of her education and the flexibility of her employer:

I guess I see myself as capable. I see myself as responsible and...yeah, being the breadwinner, I guess, and knowing that I'm the only one bringing in, it is like a sense of I can do this. It's possible. But I would say the bigger felt experience is overwhelm. I'll give an example. I have a friend who recently, she's one of my best friends, and she was a support for me when I was going through my divorce, and she's been a piano teacher her whole life, and she had never gone to college. She just went from high school to piano teaching, and her husband is a therapist and works for- I helped him get a job at Blue Cross Blue Shield- so he works doing authorizations for inpatient and case management services from the insurance provider side. And in the last three years, she said, I just kind of want to go back to school, get my education and open up some opportunities for myself. Like when COVID happened, some people pulled back on some of their financial, like, ability to pay for a piano lessons. And it didn't impact her family because her husband makes enough that it wasn't a financial thing, but she thought, 'well, if Tim ever

dies and I have to do this,' and she's seen some of her friends like myself go through single parenting, she's like, 'I just want to make sure that my kids and I would be able to survive on our own should anything happen to my husband.' So she went back to school, got her nursing degree, passed her, um, NCLATS or, I don't know, like a really difficult national exam for nursing and had been working for about three or four months in the OR, the operating room at the hospital. And she was like, 'I'm just stressed,' and she said, 'I left.' So she left. She was getting ready to move from being like an intern status to, like, full blown you're on your own in the OR. She said, 'I quit. I just decided I'm not going to do that. I don't want that kind of stress in my life. I quit. I talked to Tim. He said, you don't need this kind of stress in your life. These are the ways the family is being impacted.' And she goes, 'we'll figure it out.' And in that moment...and I might cry [*said tearfully*]... and I didn't tell her, that's the difference between not being the breadwinner and being the breadwinner is you don't get that opportunity. You don't have that choice. You don't get to say this is awful for me, this is too much. And I need to say no for myself, for my own health, for my own family's health. You don't have the luxury of that choice. You **have** to make sure there's something else lined up before you get to make those kinds of choices. You **have** to make sure that it's an equitable move at least. And that there's something there, like a safety net, because for her, her safety net is her husband's employment and a second income that could keep them afloat while she wasn't doing piano

lessons and wasn't doing nursing. But there's an incredible...that term responsibility, you know, I am responsible, um, but that with that responsibility of being the breadwinner comes just a great amount of pressure to, uh, knowing that, like, your children, whether they eat, whether they have access to medical care, whether they get to do fun things, like piano lessons or acting, all of that really rests on your shoulders...and that's just in the here and now, that's not even thinking about, like, will I be able to afford my kids' college education? Like, will I be able to fund my own retirement? I don't even think about the future right now because it's just enough to live in the moment and survive in the moment. And again, I think about, like, oh, my gosh, I'm incredibly blessed that I already had a Master's degree, and I'm working in a space where I have this incredible amount of flexibility and I get decent benefits and, you know, all of these things where I can be a good mom, you know, relative to my little stick of measurement. Um, but even then, there's, like, the financial security, I guess, it's just a lot of pressure of being the breadwinner. So, you know, I do think sometimes it's like, I got this. I can do this. I think in the terms of, like, it helps me to feel not lonely. It helps me to feel not concerned, really about our relationship because I don't need to have that kind of stress in my life. I am perfectly capable of providing for my family without having to have somebody. Um, but then I also miss out on the luxury of those kinds of choices where if something's awful in a work environment, too bad! Like, you just have to deal with it

until you have something else because there's not that safety net, the financial safety net, of having a second income or another, or someone else who's the breadwinner.

Similar to Noelle, Rosemary Jane reflected on the ways that being a single breadwinner mom had made looking into the future difficult, both in terms of the tangible aspects and in causing her emotional stress:

Well, I think it worries me. It impacts me because I'm constantly worried about it. If something was to happen to me, like, we don't have any sort of backup. Like, if I was to break my hands or something, couldn't type, I don't know, if anything was to happen to me, what would happen? I mean, I probably couldn't make the very next house payment, so I think it's worrisome. It's hard to just be one person and trying to make it. I mean, you can make your bills, but you can't get ahead. You can't save really. And you're supposed to have, what do they say? On average, you're supposed to be saving, like what, I don't know. I don't know what the ratio is, but like, two fifths or something like that. You're supposed to save a certain percentage every month. Well, I can tell you, I have \$25 going into my savings account, and usually I pull the \$25 out to use it for something, like, it's a wash. It's like a zero. So yeah, I say it's worrisome. I'm worried about this.

At the same time, Rosemary Jane also indicated feeling that she did a good job shielding her kids from her stress as a breadwinner and providing them with opportunities:

I think that they trust mom in the sense that they know mom will figure it out. They see that if mom really wants something, she makes it happen.

They haven't really seen me fail at too many things. Only relationships the only thing they've seen me fail at, but they haven't seen me fail when it comes to anything else, not really jobs, keeping the roof over their heads, cars, nothing having to do with money, vacations. We still go on things like that.

Thus, after losing her job during the summer of 2020, Rosemary Jane shared that, given her track record as a breadwinner who could make things work in the most difficult of circumstances during the pandemic, she felt empowered to accept a job as an accountant for a cannabis oil manufacturing company, even though it carried risks because of the discord between state and federal law.

Looking on the more positive side of things, Ms. Piggy, the only participant who became a breadwinner during the pandemic due to her spouse's job loss, shared how this had ultimately boosted her confidence to make a change in her relationship:

So, the last couple of years of our marriage was really rough, and I stayed around because I didn't think I could make it work on my own. And I just didn't really have that much confidence in myself. And to be honest, once we were surviving on my salary and we were making it work, and, um, the pandemic kept us home so we weren't going to movies all the time, we weren't doing all these wild, crazy things. It kind of- it built my confidence more in the fact that I was like, you know, I don't need to be stuck where I

am strictly because of money. If I'm not happy, I can make this work. It's going to be tight, but I can figure it out. And that was the big thing for me, I think, was just realizing that I don't have to be stuck in a situation just because I'm tied down with that money aspect.

Also looking on the more positive side of things, Elle reflected on how, even though she had struggled mightily as a single mom after many years of relishing her role as a stay-at-home mom, she had come to appreciate the new “savvy” and strong version of herself as the breadwinner, all while acknowledging the continual emotional ups and downs:

...so if I let myself be still long enough to think about it, I can become almost impressed with myself. And so it's that, I am a bad mama jamma, okay? I'm navigating a lot. I can say that today. Now, if you caught me 24 hours ago, I would have been blubbing up and down and left and right. So just depends on the day that you catch me! But I do see in a lot of ways, I've been built for this. It's not easy. There are moments where it's definitely not fun, but it is not going to destroy me. []...initially, I was just like, oh, my God, this breadwinning version of me, it's just...this isn't the best of me. But it took a friend to say, 'oh, hold up! She gets to see a completely different woman. Not that it's worse. She just gets a different mom. And maybe this is the mom that **she** needs. She needs the mom who is working and doing and caring for the responsibilities of the home and problem-solving and figuring it out and loving her. And so that was my paradigm shift of, okay, mmm, I'm not the stay at home mom who gets to

be there for everything, but I am the mom who still fights fearlessly for my kids, and they know I'm their biggest champion, and I am trying to do right.

Genieve, who was in the process of divorce at the time of the interview, reflected on how transitioning from married breadwinner mother to single breadwinner mother during the pandemic helped her to be able to own her strength:

I think that coming into the idea of even separating and being like, okay, let me move out, let me do this stuff. Really, people would be like, oh, you're going to have- this is going to be so hard. You're going to have all these other responsibilities. Or I knew people who weren't the breadwinners who did this, and then they were like, 'what am I going to do? I haven't worked in ten years,' and I was like, no, I got this, like, nothing's going to change. I've been paying for everything the whole time anyway. Like, I've been working the whole time, like, there's really nothing in the day to day that I'm going to have to do differently. So that made me feel good about myself in the way of, like, I got this. I could do this. I've been training for this for years. This is something that's going to be fine. But then there was like, it took me- there's times that I felt it was very hard for me to be proud of myself for things, because it's just a matter of, like, I just do them, like, it's not like I have these intentions of being proud of myself for being able to do this stuff. But then listening to friends and, um, even through therapy saying, like, no, like, I did a lot. I really did a lot. And that's okay to, like, be proud of yourself for it and to say, like,

holy crap. Like, when the shit hits the fan, like, I showed up and I did stuff, and I did well. So that's helped me change- instead of just having the perception of myself of, 'everybody's like this. I'm not doing anything special,' to really stand back and be like, oh, you know, I do show up and I **do** do great things.

As alluded to by Genieve in the above excerpt, one specific area in which the oscillations appeared frequently was when participants reflected on the constant feedback they heard from others (e.g., "oh, you're so strong!" or "how are you actually doing all that!?") as incongruent with how they viewed themselves (e.g., 'it's not a badge of honor,' "I don't have a choice"). For instance, Heather also exemplified these feelings of incongruence, stating: "I get a lot of, like, 'I don't know how you do it,' like, 'you're superwoman.' I never feel like that. I'm not really doing it. If you saw it, it maybe looks like I'm doing it, but it doesn't feel that way." Laila shared her feelings about the dissonance the external feedback provoked in her, stating:

I hear so much like, 'oh, you're so strong.' And that really isn't a compliment for me. Um, and I think it comes from a good place when they're like, 'oh, you're such a strong,' like, 'you work and you're a single mom and you work full time.' And to me, it's like there is no other option. []. It's not like this badge of honor. It's just sort of, like, what I have to do.

Similarly, Noelle also reflected on the complicated feelings that people's perceptions of her as very strong and capable in her breadwinner role would provoke:

So I think part of being the breadwinner is people just assume a lot, like, they assume that you're very strong. They assume you're very capable, and you are those things, but I don't think there's ever the perception or an understanding of that, uh, underlying difficulty. Um, like those thoughts, I don't know if I'll be able to give my kids a college education. I don't know if I will be a burden to my children because I don't have enough to save for retirement. I just have enough to, like, get us through...[], you know, but there's just never enough to do extra, to think of the future. And so I don't think there's generally an awareness because we're doing it. Like, I'm doing it. So it's just like, oh, she's got this covered. She's paying the bills and she never talks about being worried about her mortgage. So I just think it's like a general perception of people on the outside see me as, like, competent and capable and, um, successful and responsible. Like, they see generally really positive things, but I don't think they really understand or see what's underneath of that. They're just looking at that surface.

Smart Lady reflected on the incongruence between external verbal support and actual, tangible support: "I have a lot of verbal support, like, 'you can do it! I'm proud of you!' This is great, but when I need help, like, right now, it'd be great if somebody could be, like, watching my other two kids...that's the kind of thing I don't have." Gal wondered whether there was judgment on the part of others because of being the breadwinner in her marriage against typical gender role norms, giving the researcher an example of a feedback she commonly hears, and then reflected on it further:

‘How are you doing all of this?’ Just because people know that moms do so much, and then, you know, that I’m the one making more money. So, ‘how are you actually doing that?’ Yeah, so I guess it’s more subtle. Maybe it’s just me, like, thinking that and it’s not really there. But yeah, even though it’s 2021, I mean, I still feel like men are typically making more than women in relationships. And, yeah, I was just with a few girlfriends a couple of weeks ago, 4 out of the 5 of us are breadwinners. And I was like, wow. And we all have kids. And I was just like, wow, it’s not just me! And it felt good, like, again, I felt, like, empowered. Like, hell yeah. But we’re all losing our minds. It’s not going swimmingly. Um, we’re not losing our minds, but it’s hard. Nobody has it figured out. So I just thought that was striking... 4 of my dear friends, we’re all the breadwinners. And by the way, I didn’t know that.

Among married participants, the majority either questioned or affirmatively perceived that their role as household breadwinner contributed to relational conflicts with spouses, ex-spouses, and extended family members, whether minor or severe. Family of origin influences, including the pervasiveness of traditional gender role norms and expectations, were often described as contributing factors to these relationship tensions (i.e., extended family members and/or friends made comments suggestive of engrained stereotypes that men should be breadwinners, women should be responsible for domestic sphere; modeling of roles in family systems). For instance, Kaia shared the ways she feels the pressure of engrained traditional gender role expectations from her spouse and his family, even though she also discussed feeling clearly supported and respected by them:

I think my husband too, wanting to support me and make it so I could [*be the breadwinner*], but also a struggle, like, maybe I'm not present as much at home that he wants me to be. Or, you know, like, I don't know. He would be like, well, 'you don't get up and make breakfast for the kids,' but I'm like, 'but I do all these other things too,' and, you know, like, if they have a bowl of cereal, that's fine. I'm not getting up and making, you know, a five-course breakfast every day. Who does that anyway? Like, I'm more like, take care of the laundry and the rooms, and all their school stuff. Like, you're good at cooking and you love it. That's, like, your job. []. And, like, when his mom visits, you know, it's just I can feel that tension. And then he'll say things, like, after his mom visits. And it's just like, you know, she also hasn't had to work outside of the home, like, her whole life growing up, like when the kids were growing up and things like that. So I think it's definitely different. I think they, they respect me. But it also feels like there's a lot of judgment there on, like, how I do things or why I do things...

When asked what it meant to her to be the household breadwinner generally and during the pandemic, Michele immediately viewed this question from the lens of her spouse, questioning whether it might be a point of internal discomfort for him, but also discussing the long-term protection being the breadwinner affords her:

I think that my husband would probably be offended, but he knows it. He knows I'm the breadwinner, it's not...anything. It doesn't mean he's less than, though, right? Like, he's still here. I just make more. I probably make

triple what my husband makes, but I don't, like, it's not thrown in his- it's not like, well, you know, 'I make the most money, so you should just do what I tell you to do.' That's not it. I think it's just someone who just makes more money. That's it. I don't think it means you are better than anybody or you're doing something better. I think it's just the number is the number. []. I don't think it bothers him, at least he doesn't say it does. Heck, if it does, I have no clue. I think he, like I said, he benefits from it. We live a good life because of it and I don't even know if my children even know who makes more money. Again, it's just, like, not something that we walk around talking about, it works for our life. And then if one day, because our marriage is okay, but there's been times, like, we've separated before, and so one day, if that ever has to happen again, I'll be totally fine because I am the breadwinner. And I'm also okay with that, too.

Later on, Michele also reflected on the influence of extended family members opinions rooted in traditional gender role expectations for what her spouse should be doing:

I think some people though, again, may view him kind of less than. I think my mother-in-law has even said I should make him- so the way our house is set up is I actually pay everything. My husband only really pays for his car though, like his cell phone. And he carries one of the boys on his cell phone and like, miscellaneous things, like yard stuff or something that he needs really. And I pay, like, the mortgage, I pay all the bills, I pay my car, I pay everything right? And so my mother-in-law knows this, and

she's like, you need to make him pay half the utilities or something, but I have it. I don't need him to pay that. Like, and other people, I think, even some of my friends are like, 'girl, why are you paying all this stuff?' And I'm like, I was also raised by a single mother who worked multiple jobs and did not depend on anyone, but like, my grandmother, right? She didn't depend on a man, and that was always what was taught to me. And so I don't think I ever want to depend on anyone else. And I won't. Um, so if one day he decides he wants to pay more bills, I have no problem with that [laughter], but as for now, this works.

Smart Lady shared that she had experienced significant issues in her marital relationship because of holding differing views from her spouse pertaining to their respective roles and contributions with her as the breadwinner, both in general and during the pandemic. She elaborated on what things had been like during the pandemic once her spouse's restaurant employer laid him off and he was home full-time with the kids and in charge of remote schooling and other daily caregiving responsibilities:

I'm holding up my end of the bargain here, which is like working myself down to the bone, but you need to take care of the kids. That's your role right now. It's like a constant battle when there's an issue. When everybody is healthy, when everybody is fine, everybody's eating all the snacks they want, we don't really have too many arguments about it. It's when I really need you to be the caregiver that makes decisions. And I don't know, I have no idea what this is about- I don't know if this is

something every man struggle with or just my spouse. But I would say when it comes time to make care-giving decisions, like, where you have to decide what to do about this situation pertaining to the child, pertaining to dinner, pertaining to cleaning up, pertaining to whatever the caregiving domestic stuff is, he can't make a decision. He's like, 'well, what you think I should do?' And I'm like, 'I think you should do it. You just get it done, whatever it is.' []. Oh, my God! My number one complaint in my relationship right now is I would like a moment to not think about it, like, anything, like, you can do it! Whatever it is, I want you to make the decision and do it.

As part of this, Smart Lady spoke openly and candidly about the conflicted feelings that she felt about herself as a breadwinner relative to traditional gender role stereotypes, as well as the ways that she felt her husband's view of himself had been impacted in relation to her being the breadwinner against traditional gender role norms for heterosexual marriages. First with regards to how being the household breadwinner has impacted her view of herself, Smart Lady reflected quite honestly that:

I don't feel like a woman all the time. When I have conversations about, like, gender roles and stuff like that, I have to explain to people that my relationship right now is not a typical, you know, like, my husband doesn't work. And I'm not embarrassed by it, I'm okay with it. But where I don't feel like a woman all the time is when I have to sort of talk to my husband about things that he should be doing that he's not doing. And none of those

things relate to the typical things that a woman might say to a man. Like, I need money for this or that. That's never a conversation because we got money. Like, money ain't a problem. It's 'I need these dirty clothes off the floor,' 'I need you to wash this shit,' 'I need you to cook something for these kids to eat,' like, you know? And to me, it makes me feel weird because I'm a woman, right? Like, I know how to wash the clothes, I know how to cook and clean, and I do a better job at these things, except for the cooking, because he's actually a chef, um, but the cleaning and all that kind of stuff. I do a better job at these things, but because my husband has taken on those responsibilities, he feels like, like if I try to help him, he can't stand it. He doesn't want me to help him, but he also doesn't do it in a timely fashion. []. And so it's like small little things like that that I feel, like, if I was just able to stay at home and had time to do these things, I wouldn't say anything about them, but the fact that I'm like having to say something about them to a man makes me feel less than a woman. It makes me feel like I'm manly. Like, I say this all the time that I don't get caught up in the gender stereotypes, but I'm lying to myself when I say that, because it actually makes me feel bad. And so those things make me feel less than a woman, because I don't have the time to nurture like I want to. I don't have time to nurture my children, nurture my house, you know, my environment, how I want it to be, because I'm busy making sure that we can even have this environment, right?

In further reference to traditional gender role expectations, Smart Lady also delineated the ways that she felt her spouse's own concerns with her breadwinner status had a tangible impact on their relationship:

If you ask him, he will claim to be this person that don't care about gender stereotypes and gender roles. And this is what works for my family. Like, he can talk a good game. But when the going is tough, like today, and I need you to be the person that's taking care of the children, you have a sick child. The things he was saying today was, like, I need you to help with the kids. All you want to do is work. This is your child. You should be caring for him. And I'm like, what make you think I don't care about these kids? Like, that is why I'm working! []. My husband says he doesn't have a problem with it, but my husband has a serious problem with it. He just don't want to tell me. And I think he don't want to tell me, not because, like, he know it won't hurt my feelings, because if he want to go to work and me stay at home, I will absolutely love that, it will be just a miracle! The problem is he don't have an opportunity to do that. And so rather than say, I don't have an opportunity, that's why it's not happening, he's saying stuff like, 'well, you make more money than me anyway, so this makes sense.' Where it becomes like a real place of contention in my relationship is because his family hate the fact that he doesn't work. He has always been a breadwinner up until seven years ago, when we moved back here basically. Before then, he was making good money, and I was staying at home and we didn't even have children. And whenever his

family wanted \$100 here, \$200 there, he would just have it and he'd give it to them. He doesn't have an income that he's bringing in. So he don't dish out money like that anymore. We're benevolent people. And so if somebody actually has a need, we talk about it amongst ourselves and we help where we can. But it's not his money. It's not my money either. It's ours. And so his family, when he was the breadwinner, it was *his* money. Now that I'm the breadwinner, it's *our* money, right? And so I have this little thing that I say. I don't say it when I'm mad or anything, but I do think it a lot, like in the back of my head, I'm like, he's pimping me really good! Like, this is a real good pimping situation. But with that being said, I think my husband is... he's comfortable, but uncomfortable. He's comfortable because we do have what we need in the situation financially. He's uncomfortable when it comes to, like, being around people who ascribe to those gender stereotypes that a man should be like, leading the household. A man should be working. And those types of things.

Several participants who had separated or divorced during the pandemic perceived their outsized role as the family caretaker, in terms of both economics and household/child responsibilities, as a contributing factor to their relational dissolution, either because of their partner's dissatisfaction, their dissatisfaction, or both. For example, Ms. Piggy, who indicated that her divorce had been finalized the week of our interview, described the tension in her marriage when she became the breadwinner during the pandemic:

Our downfall was kind of when I was working, he was not. I think it really bothered him more than it bothered me. It didn't bother me. You know, my thought was, you need to be home with the kids and helping with online school and all that. And I think that was kind of where the resentment came in. I didn't care that he was home. Honestly. I mean, he didn't lose his job because he wasn't doing a good job. He lost his job because it's COVID and all the theaters being closed. There's nothing you can do about that.

Genieve, the other participant who separated from her spouse and was in the process of divorce proceedings at the time of our interview, commented:

I think that there was resentment on both of our parts. And I can say that easier now being separated or removed from the situation. When you're in the situation, I think it goes back to just how I am, right? Like, I have a situation, I deal with it. Like, I have to do this stuff, so I did. I think that there was times that he was sad that he wasn't contributing more. And for me, there was times where I was resentful that I had to pay for everything.

However, as noted earlier, Genieve also reflected on the increased confidence she felt she gained, as well as the safety net she felt being a breadwinner provided:

As the primary breadwinner for 16 years of my marriage, whether married, living together or married or separate or even now, divorced, the—it's not confidence, I guess it's a part of confidence—but just the freedom and the confidence that comes with being the breadwinner, I think often times for me outweighs all the hard parts. And I think just

being able to go through something—a divorce, separation, a death, anything—and know that you're going to be okay because you have a job and you are the breadwinner, is so important and comforting.

Summary of Theme

To summarize, the final theme reflects participants' mixed feelings and perceptions about their status and role as household breadwinners. These feelings appeared amplified during the pandemic because of increased role responsibilities, financial stressors, relational issues, and other factors. When participants described themselves in this role they fluctuated between positive emotions, feelings, and thoughts associated with their breadwinning role and negative or pessimistic feelings, thoughts, and emotions. The hallmark of ambivalence denoted by this theme appeared fueled by a variety of factors, including incongruence between internal and external perceptions of themselves in this role and conflicting experiences related to family role and/or cultural expectations.

Member Reflections on Final Themes and Interview Process

Soliciting participants' perspectives on both the interview process and construction of final themes was an important part of this research, both for purposes of methodological integrity and for the implications that participant feedback on the interview process might have for future research or counseling contexts.

Several months after the interview, participants were invited to give their feedback on the final themes. In total, seven of twelve participants provided feedback and reflections on the study's thematic results, either through an email exchange with me or through an online questionnaire that allowed them to remain anonymous. Overall, all who

responded indicated that the final themes reflected their experiences well. A few of these participants gave more specific feedback, pointing to which themes resonated more or less strongly. For example, one participant who remained anonymous indicated that themes 1, 2, and 3 resonated most strongly for her. With regards to theme 1, she stated, “It resonates with me a great amount. I love that it’s called “juggling” because some days I feel like the ring master,” and with regards to theme 2, she stated, “again, this is spot on!” Another participant said that all themes resonated either a fair amount or strongly for her, but indicated that theme 4 resonated most strongly, though she did not qualify this response further.

All participants gave feedback on their experience of the interview process immediately following the conclusion of their interview. Most commonly, participants remarked on the value of the interview process itself, using words such as “therapeutic,” “emotional,” and “cathartic” to describe what it had been like for them to speak with me about their experiences. Several participants even remarked that it had been the first opportunity they had to vocalize and process through many of their experiences aloud. For example, Michele stated, “Your questions were great. Um, I think they were very thought provoking. Things that I knew had happened but just hadn’t vocalized, so it was nice to kind of get them out. It was real therapeutic, I would say. I feel like I had a therapy session right now! [laughter]” Similarly, Laila stated, “it made me really kind of think and reflect on a lot of different things that I just don’t normally do,” and Kaia stated, “It’s kind of reflective and getting me to think a lot about the aspects of it I haven’t thought about in a while, I guess. And clarifying it a little bit for my own process.”

Several participants highlighted how processes of reflection during the interview helped them to gain a new or different perspective on their experiences. For example, Rosemary Jane stated: “It’s been a good recap of—it actually has helped me to see some positives, because I know that there’s, like, some positives, but it was a super traumatic time and I don’t feel like it’s over per se, but I feel like the world has shifted and my attitude towards things have shifted.” Similarly, Elle also shared how the interview process helped her to clarify her feelings and thoughts about things:

I enjoy the reflection and, you know, like the opportunity to- ‘cause some of this stuff I knew, like, cognitively knew, and some of this has just kind of been, like, floating ethereal kind of ideals- ideas and ideals. And so it’s, like, wait a minute, let me grab on to that one! That is important to me. Let me hold onto that. And so this time has really helped me, um, navigate that to really begin to see it even more clearly.

Lastly, several participants expressed their deep gratitude for the opportunity to be heard and have their stories told. For example, Noelle stated, “I think it’s really important for these stories to be told, and it gives people space to tell that story. So it’s been nice to be able to be heard and seen.” Similarly, Gal stated, “I think when I saw your flyer, I was just, like, at the risk of sounding cheesy, ‘she’s talking to me!’ Like, someone wants to hear what this is like! You know, you see stuff on social media, but no one is getting into it. So I just was, like, we need to give voice to this, and so I’m grateful for the opportunity.” I will conclude with a final reflection on the value of the interview shared by Koala, as it echoes many of the thoughts already shared while also striking a deep note

for me personally as a fellow mother, human being, researcher, therapist, and future counselor educator:

Thank you for having such a listening ear and, you know, to just really want to hear my story. I think that's so unique. I feel like I would never have this opportunity to tell my story to anyone. I think a part of human nature is you want to tell your story, right? Like, you want your story to be heard, but it's like, who's going to hear it? But to be able to tell a story, to have you ask me questions, and then have me also reflect on things and think about it from the perspective of your questions, I think it's been a really great experience. Otherwise I don't think I would process it. It's like, as a working mom, as a mom in general, I think you don't have time and you don't make time to reflect. Maybe you reflect once your kids are in college and you're like, okay. Maybe. So I think this has been a really good opportunity to reflect on things that I would have never had the opportunity to do so. So I think it's a very unique opportunity and I want to thank you for that opportunity.

Chapter IV: DISCUSSION

Based on preliminary evidence indicating that working mothers experienced intense challenges to work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with a general dearth of research examining the experiences of *breadwinner* mothers specifically, this study sought to better understand the lived experiences of *breadwinning* mothers who concurrently worked remotely and facilitated remote schooling for their elementary school-aged children during the pandemic. The primary research questions guiding this study aimed to better understand the impact of the pandemic on participants' daily routines and lives, as well as how they understood and made meaning of their experiences in light of dominant cultural norms regarding motherhood, work, breadwinning, and other areas of their identities. Thus, this research employed methods of interpretative phenomenological analysis, and was guided by frameworks of "doing" and "undoing gender," intersectionality theory, and scholarly literature and research examining intersections of motherhood, work, and the COVID-19 pandemic within the context of the United States.

Summary of Results

To answer the research questions, potential participants were invited to complete an online prescreening questionnaire, and based on principles of maximum variation sampling, a diverse sample of 12 breadwinner mothers were selected to complete semi-structured interviews. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in accordance with recommended analytic methods for IPA research. Through close thematic analyses of data in light of contextual similarities and differences across all participants, four overarching themes were discerned: (1) *Intensification of an Already Non-Stop and*

Exhausting “Juggling Act” (2), Left to One’s Own Devices, Figuratively and Sometimes Literally (3), Merging of Work and Home Life as a Double-Edged Sword; and (4) Ambivalence about Breadwinner Status.

Given the idiographic commitment of IPA and the theoretical framework of intersectionality underpinning this study, Chapter Three presented a detailed overview of participants’ backgrounds, their contextual experiences of motherhood and working motherhood, and the thematic findings pertaining to the research questions. Accordingly, presentation of thematic results included significant focus to participants’ stories and experiences in their own voices. In this chapter, I discuss the main findings of this study in connection to the literature and theoretical frameworks guiding the study. Following this, I address strengths and limitations, and conclude with a discussion of the implications for counseling, training, and future research.

Discussion of Findings

Given central tenets of this study, it was important to better understand participants’ general contexts as mothers, workers, and breadwinners. This provided a contextual frame of understanding through which their experiences during the pandemic could be better understood and analyzed. Overall, the breadwinner mothers in this study represented a diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds, geographic regions, income levels, job types, and relationship statuses. Half of the mothers were married or partnered, and the other half were single. Overall, the distribution of married vs. single breadwinner mothers was more equal in this sample than what Wang et al. (2013) found in the general population (63% single, 37% married). Additionally, trends pertaining to breadwinner mothers by group (married vs. single) were not applicable to this purposeful convenience

sample of breadwinner mothers. For example, whereas Wang et al. (2013) observed that single breadwinner mothers in the general population tended to be non-White and with lower levels of income and education, all participants in this study were highly educated, with non-White mothers among those with the highest levels of income and education across the sample.

Although participants had their own unique experiences and perspectives of motherhood and working motherhood apart from their pandemic experiences, several commonalities were noted across all participants in terms of how they viewed themselves in these roles generally. First, being a mother was clearly a purposeful and intentional life role for the individuals in this study. All participants described their journey to motherhood as either planned, inevitable, or natural. As part of these characterizations, participants' views of motherhood appeared to tacitly endorse essentialist views of mothering (i.e., mothering as natural and instinctual), ideas which have been described as imbedded within dominant ideologies of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996; Forbes et al., 2020a; Forbes et al., 2020b). Second, the majority of participants described motherhood as one of the most important and fulfilling roles in their lives, while also being among the most complex and emotionally laborious life roles. In this way, participants' descriptions of the centrality of motherhood in their lives concurs with observations pertaining to the continuing dominant force of intensive mothering ideologies in the lives of women today (Ennis, 2014; Hays, 1996). Third, all participants were able to identify ways in which they either personally experienced or witnessed the impact of external social and cultural expectations on mothers in the culture at large. Thus, participants agreed that larger cultural pressures significantly contributed to the 'matrix of tensions' (Oberman &

Josselson, 1996) that working mothers face, which often includes significant components of stress, guilt, and anxiety related to the performance of all their roles (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Forbes et al., 2020b; Sutherland, 2010). Lastly, participants' accounts of working motherhood prior to the pandemic corroborated the prevailing view of work-life balance as a particularly elusive goal for many working mothers (Gerson, 2010; Williams, 2000, 2010). Collectively, participants' general conceptualizations of mothering and working motherhood corroborated the ongoing pervasiveness of hegemonic and competing ideologies in shaping the experiences of working and breadwinning mothers today.

Theme 1

The first thematic finding, *Intensification of a Nonstop and Exhausting "Juggling" Act*, underscores that, for the breadwinning mothers in this sample, the tasks of remote work and remote schooling during the pandemic were experienced as intense, overwhelming, and exhausting. This corroborates findings pertaining to the disproportionate burdens experienced by working mothers during the pandemic (Heggeness, 2020; Igielnik, 2021; Kashen et al., 2020; PRC, 2018). Moreover, as added challenges were on top of those already experienced due to their multiple roles and responsibilities, participants in this study commonly associated their juggling act with cognitive overload and role strain, as has been described in other research (Johnston & Swanson, 2007; Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2014). This general finding was not surprising and supports an abundant body of work-family research indicating that mothers remain ultimately responsible for the executive management of the domestic sphere, whether single or married (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Doucet, 2006; Hodkinson &

Brooks, 2018), and including mothers who also function as the household breadwinners (Chesley, 2017; Chesley & Flood, 2017; PRC, 2018).

Additionally, this theme emphasizes that, even though the events of the pandemic introduced a set of unfamiliar variables into the mix, the act of juggling itself was already quite familiar to these mothers. In other words, for these breadwinner mothers, achieving an ideal work-life balance was already perceived as a significant challenge, which concurs with an extensive body of research around the ongoing challenge of work-life balance for working and breadwinning mothers, often resulting in stress, anxiety, and other negative repercussions (e.g., Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; Collins, 2019; Kramer & Pak, 2018). In fact, a recent Harris survey poll published by the American Psychological Association (2021) indicated that, 18 months into the pandemic, parents of dependent children not only were more likely to report stress and everyday decision-making fatigue than their non-parent counterparts (47% vs 30%), but they also reported even higher levels of everyday stress and decision-making fatigue than they did in 2020, suggesting an increase in stress on parents as the pandemic continued.

As the naming of this theme implies, many of the participants explicitly used the term ‘juggling’ to describe their experiences. This verb has commonly been used to describe how working mothers’ perform their various life roles, both in general parlance and similarly focused research (e.g., Lamar et al., 2020). Perhaps then it is worth more closely examining the analogy in relationship to the very physical and mental processes that *actual* juggling entails. The word ‘juggling’ was often used by participants in association with descriptions of cognitive tasks and decision-making. In this way, it is akin to the concept of ‘cognitive acrobatics’ coined by Johnston and Swanson (2007) in

their study examining working mothers' sense of selves. Even if one has never attempted to physically juggle, its highly physically and cognitively demanding components may be evident. Speaking as a former member of a juggling club, in order to keep all balls in motion one cannot visually focus too long on any one particular ball in order to see all balls at once, otherwise you risk dropping every ball. An experienced juggler stares straight forward, eyes focused at some distant point in order to see all balls at once. The upside is that all balls stay in the air; the downside is that there is no time to observe the unique attributes of any one ball. This might be analogous to ways in which participants viewed the cognitive demands of their juggling acts as barriers to being mentally and relationally present with their children, spouses, or other individuals. Further, the better one gets at juggling, the more automatic it becomes. There is no time to think, reflect, or process beyond the immediate task of juggling at hand, as was noted by many participants in their feedback related to the interview process itself.

Viewed through an intersectional lens, it's important to note that the intensified juggling act appeared qualitatively different for the Black and African American mothers in the sample. Although several White and other non-White participants referenced the larger political and social context during the pandemic, the Black and African American mothers all spoke poignantly about the acts of racial violence that prompted national attention, outrage, and unrest in the Summer of 2020 as inseparably linked to their experiences as working mothers during the pandemic. For example, they described in detail how discussing these events with their children, families, and coworkers added an extra dimension of stress, worry, and emotional labor, especially given their role as primary nurturers in their families. Yet, these mothers' experiences was less akin to

another ball in their juggling act, but rather a representation of their more precarious position on an uneven foundation they had long stood on while attempting to juggle.

Overall, this theme confirms other research findings demonstrating that working and breadwinning mothers faced significant work-life balance challenges during the pandemic (Heggeness, 2020; Igielnik, 2021; Kashen et al., 2020). Moreover, as these mothers were already used to a high level of difficulty and responsibility inherent to their juggling act, they soldiered through these challenges, with potentially negative impacts to their own physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Research has continued to confirm the earliest warnings about the impact of the pandemic on rising levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and other deleterious mental health effects (AAP, 2021; APA, 2021).

Additionally, as discussed most directly by Black and African American mothers, but also mentioned by several others, the experience of intensified juggling also cannot easily be divorced from the larger sociopolitical context (akin to the ground that theoretically supported these women as they juggled) during which time racial violence, political unrest, and targeted campaigns of media disinformation all exacerbated social divisions and heightened general levels of stress, fear, and anxiety (APA, 2020; Brooks et al., 2020).

Theme 2

Theme 2, *Left to One's Own Devices, Figuratively and Sometimes Literally*, emphasizes participants' core experiences of ultimate responsibility and self-reliance in their role as mothers to ensure their kids' remote schooling experiences. This was the case even when other adults, spouses, or partners played a key or assistive role in facilitating the tangible tasks of remote schooling. This was described as a main

contributor to the intensity of their overall juggling act, especially because of all the additional roles and responsibilities that were required beyond just academics when kids were home. This finding concurs with research indicating that mothers took on more responsibility in terms of remote schooling during the pandemic (Heggeness & Fields, 2020; Kashen et al., 2020), just as they have tended to be more involved and responsible for ensuring their kids' academic development when compared to fathers in general (Chesley, 2017; Chesley & Flood, 2017). In this way, the mothers in this study largely performed in accordance with gender role expectations in their roles as mothers, thereby "doing gender."

In addition to general experiences of ultimate responsibility for their kids' remote schooling overall, the mothers in this study expressed feeling that they were ultimately responsible or had to be self-reliant when it came to the remote schooling component in three main ways: (1) when it came to the procurement of actual devices for their kids' remote schooling, (2) in accessing and/or navigating the virtual learning platforms and other technological tools used by schools, (3) and when it came to assisting with the actual academic content, along with their kids' socioemotional needs.

As discussed in Chapter 3, participants frequently described buying or borrowing devices for their children for the express purposes of remote schooling. Some—though not all—made explicit mention that they were socioeconomically privileged to be able to procure devices on their own in lieu of waiting for a school-issued device. It has been estimated that, at the start of the pandemic, approximately 7.3 million students did not have access to home computers and nearly 17 million students did not have high-speed home internet access (Ferren, 2021). Therefore, even though many participants were left

to their own devices in a literal sense, the fact that they were able to be self-sufficient in this particular way reinforces research pointing to disparities in socioeconomics and regional factors as playing a key role in remote schooling access and participation levels when this was the primary or sole mode of school learning, especially during the earliest phases of the pandemic (Halloran et al., 2021).

Consequently, most of the mothers in this research commented on the relative advantage that their children had in being able to continue making academic progress because of economic and/or geographic privilege given what was required for successful remote schooling. In turn, they either de-emphasized or did not express major concerns about whether or not their kids might fall behind academically. This is notable given widespread attention to fears that COVID-19 mitigation efforts impacting children, such as masking, school closures, and less than optimal modes of school instruction, might leave a whole generation of kids behind. Although pandemic impacts to students' academic progress was still being uncovered at the time of this research, one recent report found that while overall academic achievement was lower at the end of the 2020-2021 school year when compared to pre-pandemic achievement gain trends, especially in the area of math, younger students as well as those from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds were disproportionately impacted (Lewis et al., 2021). This finding supports a cause for concern generally. However, when viewed from an intersectional lens, it also corroborates what these mothers seemed to sense intuitively given their relatively socially privileged economic positions—their self-reliance, in itself a privilege stemming from access to resources, mitigated concerns that their kids might fall behind academically. In other words, these mothers perceived what education researchers have feared most,

which was that educational disadvantages during the pandemic would most severely impact those already most disadvantaged, in effect, widening the already persistent achievement gap (Dorn et al., 2020).

Even so, given that most participants indicated that their children attended tax-funded public schools, it is worth examining these acts of self-reliance and individual responsibility from within the larger neoliberal sociopolitical context of the United States. In theory, and apart from a neoliberal context, it is plausible that participants might have had the expectation that publicly funded schools should have been better prepared and equipped to support and provide them with the tools needed. The same has been said regarding the general lack of governmental preparation for a pandemic of the proportions experienced, particularly within countries dominated by neoliberal tendencies (Navarro, 2020). Neoliberalism, a political and economic ideology that applies traditional values of liberalism to a free market economy, has shaped governmental policies leading to privatization and commercialization of social sector services around the globe, including public education and health, along with the valorization of principles of self-reliance and individual responsibility (Steger & Roy, 2010). As a result, social welfare programs have diminished, undermining group solidarity along with any expectations of a social safety net (Becker et al., 2021). Lack of support and investment in the public education system is thought to be one such consequence of neoliberal politics. In light of this perspective, participants' self-reliance seems unsurprising, as they seemed to easily accept digging into their own pockets to buy devices or upgrade their internet services for their kids' learning.

Similarly, participants also indicated being ultimately responsible and self-reliant in learning to navigate the virtual spaces and digital tools that schools used for academic instruction. They described this digital learning curve as accompanied by either minimal or confusing technical support, as well as a general lack of guidance from schools and districts. The mothers interviewed in this research worked in professional class positions and described the transition to remote working specific to their worker role as relatively seamless, and therefore were clearly high in their level of technological proficiency. Nevertheless, they did not speak in the same terms regarding the navigation of virtual and digital technologies when it came to their kids' remote learning. More often than not, these experiences were associated with high levels of stress and frustration, perhaps in part, because they required a high degree of oversight, assistance, or troubleshooting, especially for younger children who did not have computer proficiency skills themselves. Participants' high levels of frustration in this area is notable in the sense that most seemed to possess high levels of technological proficiency, and may have been more technologically savvy than the average parent during the pandemic. According to data reported by the Center for American Progress on remote learning during the pandemic (Ferren, 2021), approximately 40% of parents in one state-wide survey rated themselves as low in technological proficiency skills and only half of teachers said that most or all of their students had the necessary skills themselves to be successful at distance learning.

Finally, with regard to theme 2, several participants also described feeling ultimately on their own when it came to helping their kids with instructional and academic components of remote schooling. Moreover, many described feeling alone in their worries and endeavors to support their kids' socioemotional wellbeing. In terms of

academics, Davis et al. (2021) contended that parents became ‘forced proxy educators’ during the pandemic, which led to elevated levels of generalized stress and anxiety overall, but especially for parents of kids who struggled to adapt to a distance learning format. They concluded that, because parents are being tasked to help their kids with academic instruction without any formal training, resulting in negative mental health outcomes to them personally, schools should have a responsibility to better support parents during the ongoing pandemic, including through provision of mental health services to them in addition to their children. Lastly, given their self-identified roles as primary emotional nurturers, together with evidence that kids’ mental health has declined at alarming rates (AAP, 2021), it is unsurprising that the mothers interviewed expressed more concern about their kids’ mental health than they did about their academic performance. This finding supports calls to maintain vigilance around the ways that pandemic-related stressors have increased rates of mental health challenges across the spectrum, but with disproportionate impacts to kids and families of color (APA, 2021).

Theme 3

Theme 3, *Merging of Work and Home Life as a Double-Edged Sword*, hones in on participants’ essential experience of work-home life integration at this unique time as cutting both ways, both for better and for worse. As described in Chapter 3, negative aspects most frequently revolved around considerations of physical space, boundaries, and technology, leading to general experiences of mental exhaustion, role overload, and diminished sense of wellbeing. The enactment of all roles within the same space, with the added dimension of remote schooling and caretaking of children, exacerbated work-life integration difficulties, especially related to cognitive components of the intensified

juggling act (e.g., cognitive overload, decision-making fatigue; Johnston & Swanson, 2007). In general, this finding corroborates national survey data that found more than half of parents with children under 18 reported considerable difficulty working from home in comparison with only 20% of adults working from home who did not have young children (Parker et al., 2020).

Moreover, several participants described in depth the ways that boundary challenges were influenced by the developmental level of their children, who often could not go for considerable periods of time without supervision (a particular challenge for the single mothers in this study). Further, because all participants identified as primary emotional nurturers and caregivers within their homes generally, this created challenges in role separation while working from home because their children viewed them foremost from within the relational context of mothering and nurturing. This seemed especially true because they brought their worker role into their home space and not the other way around (i.e., bringing children into work spaces). This set the stage for conflict between their own internalized ideals of how they should be performing as a mother and how they should be performing as a worker, as influenced by their own conceptualizations of these roles, as well as external cultural and social pressures and ideologies. For many mothers, feelings of guilt were often a consequence of these dynamics, underscoring findings of researchers related to the pervasive toll of guilt on working mothers (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Forbes et al., 2020b; Oberman & Josselson, 1996; Sutherland, 2010).

Another challenge commonly identified by participants was feeling that they took on even more roles because of having children home aside from just serving as their proxy educators. In effect, they incorporated even more responsibilities into their daily

routines, thereby increasing feelings of stress and work-family conflict. Although some researchers have found positive relationships between working mothers' wellbeing and greater role set density (Carlson et al., 2006; Glynn et al., 2009), defined as the number of different roles assumed, others have found that a combination of perceived role quality and access to resources both make a difference in terms of whether high role set density either increases or decreases working mothers' perceptions of work-family conflict and subjective distress (Haggag et al., 2012; Kulik & Liberman, 2013). The breadwinner mothers interviewed in this research generally described high levels of stress and conflict while navigating all their roles and responsibilities during the pandemic. Moreover, reflections on their intensified juggling act were often accompanied with expressions of guilt and statements such as, "I felt like I was doing nothing right," insinuating that perceived role quality, or role satisfaction, greatly diminished during this time. Consequently, the findings of the current study seem to support contentions that, for working mothers, perceived role quality may be the more critical factor influencing experiences of work-family conflict and personal wellbeing than simply role set density alone.

Continuing with the negative side of the sword, many participants discussed that their own self-care had diminished during this time, with at least a few questioning whether it even mattered in the whole scheme of things during the pandemic. This is an understandable sentiment given the total devastation wreaked by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a death toll at time of publication of this dissertation of nearly 6 million persons worldwide, and almost one million of these in the United States alone (WHO, 2022). On the other hand, given the intensity of the juggling act for these breadwinning

mothers, the adage to secure one's own oxygen mask before helping others seems fitting. To quote Black civil right activist and feminist Audre Lorde, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (1988/2017, p. 146). Unfortunately, establishing a practice of self-care all too often seems most difficult for those who are most in need of it.

For many of the mothers in this study, taking care of oneself was described in ways that likened it to just one more ball in the juggling routine. This might explain the subtly self-blaming statements that accompanied many participants' reflections on their lack of self-care during the pandemic: "I'm not too good at self-care," said one participant, as though this was just one more thing about which she felt badly or guilty. Sadly, from the purview of an invisible neoliberal socio-political context, the *individual* is responsible to juggle it all *and* bear the responsibility to do what is needed to take care of oneself to keep it all going. Given the collective dimension to working mothers' struggles, it is important to acknowledge the systemic and structural issues that surround them, implying that individually-focused solutions are at once both difficult and insufficient. Unfortunately, one of the most difficult aspects of the pandemic was the enforced social isolation and lockdowns due to disease mitigation efforts, making community care within one's already established networks of family and friends perhaps equally as elusive as personal self-care during the pandemic. Based on the interviews conducted in this research, the need for both self-care and community care seemed to be greatest among the single mothers, although still present for the married mothers too, suggesting that principles of intersectionality together with the concept of community care (people working together to leverage their resources and privileges to support each

other; Valerio, 2019, para 13) might be effectively used by working mothers and their allies to support and advocate for each other in practical and political ways.

Overall, participants' negative experiences of merging work and home life support contentions around the difficulty of work-life balance issues for working mothers generally, but especially so given the intensified juggling act during the time of the pandemic. However, as the analogy to a double-edged sword implies, participants also found benefits and unexpected silver linings. Positive benefits related to their various roles and relationships, and included a variety of specifics: having increased quality of time with family; no longer having to commute to a separate workplace; being able to integrate worker role tasks with domestic tasks at home; increasing their window of understanding into their kids' schooling; and once they got better hang of the intensified juggling act, enjoyment of the "simple stuff." At core to many of the positive benefits described by participants appeared to be experiences of increased flexibility, control, autonomy, learning, growth, genuine relational connection, and fulfillment.

In terms of experiences of increased flexibility, control, and autonomy, the breadwinner mothers in this study largely described these gains in terms of how they benefited their worker role. As previously reviewed, working mothers have long suffered both tangible and intangible negative outcomes in the workplace, or what has been referred to as the 'motherhood penalty' when compared to men and non-mothers (e.g., Bear & Glick, 2017; Crosby et al., 2004). The motherhood penalty has been viewed as a partial manifestation of workspaces structured around stereotypical masculine norms (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Williams, 2010). Thus, even while companies have increasingly sought to support employees in achieving better work-life balance through flex-time and

remote working options, working mothers have cited concerns that they will be perceived as less competent or reliable than other workers if they utilize these options (Lott & Abendroth, 2020). From this perspective, the pandemic leveled the playing field in the sense that all professional class workers who could work remotely—whether mothers, fathers, or otherwise—were forced to do so. Even though ‘second shift’ responsibilities still largely fell on mothers (Heggeness, 2020; Igielnik, 2021; Kashen et al., 2020; PRC, 2018), similar to the breadwinner mothers in this study, professional class working women and mothers may have perceived a benefit to their worker role while remote working during the pandemic in terms of increased control, autonomy, and flexibility around how they structured their work days.

The constructs of increased flexibility, control, and autonomy related to the worker role might also be understood through an intersectional lens. A number of participants spoke directly to experiences of stigma and marginalization in relation to their race and/or single mother status, sharing specific examples of how this had impacted them negatively in their workplaces. For single and Black mothers in this study, there was a notable emphasis on the positive gains they perceived from remote working. As a result, many of these breadwinner mothers had either transitioned to permanent remote working positions during the pandemic or were in the planning stages to do so. Further, given evidence that mothers of color experience disproportionate impacts of the motherhood penalty (Collins, 2019), as well as commonly experience race-based stress and microaggressions in the workplace (Giele, 2008; Holder et al., 2015; Lewis & Neville, 2015), it may be that for these women the benefits perceived in areas of flexibility, control, and autonomy while remote working lessened the impact of negative

stressors experienced on account of race and gender in majority White and male structured work spaces. During the pandemic, working at home limited face-to-face interactions in direct physical proximity to coworkers and supervisors, thereby potentially decreasing exposure to microaggressions.

In terms of benefits, at the heart of the experiences described as beneficial by participants were elements of learning, growth, genuine relational connection, and fulfillment. As discussed in Chapter 3, participants indicated that not only had they learned more about their kids through increased involvement with their schooling, but their kids also learned more about who they were in their professional working roles. Several participants associated learning in these areas with improvements to parenting skills and enhancing their sense of selves as mothers. In turn, children's learning may have helped them develop a more expansive view of their mothers as complex and complete people, with responsibilities and identities beyond just who they were in relation to them as a mother. To this point, because the pandemic enabled kids a closer view into parents' work days, child development experts believe this may have provided important role modeling for children's own future career development, as well as improved emotional skills (Rich, 2021). For kids of breadwinner mothers in particular, role modeling for their children during this time may have also challenged the transmission of gendered assumptions particular to family roles and the world of work in general, again making strides towards "undoing gender." Additionally, although most participants made clear that they would never have chosen to be cast in the role of 'proxy educator' for their children had circumstances not necessitated it, elements of learning

and growth were undoubtedly inherent to experiences of increased engagement with teachers, schools, and the digital and technological tools involved in remote learning.

A number of participants described feeling that, once they had a handle on things, they were able to “slow down” and spend more quality time with their kids and families. According to weekly survey data collected by researchers from the Center for Translational Neuroscience (CTN) at the University of Oregon during the initial months of the pandemic (2020), although there was an increase in family conflict in households with young children, levels of family cohesion and affection generally remained high. In the current study, several participants indicated that experiences of genuine relational connection and fulfillment with their kids existed in tandem to experiences of deep relational conflict with their spouses. In two cases, participants who were married at the start of the pandemic were divorced nearly 18 months later by the time of their interview. Thus, findings from the current study appear to support these and other data highlighting aspects of both family strain and family cohesion as a result of the pandemic (CTN, 2020; Davis et al., 2021; Igielnik, 2021; Rich, 2021).

Overall, the experience of work and home life merging as a double-edged sword described by the participants in this research support theory and findings of several strains of work-family research. This includes the ways that work-family spillover can both benefit and challenge each domain (e.g., Cardenas et al., 2004; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), as well as longstanding work-life balance issues for working mothers of various backgrounds due to larger cultural, social, and structural factors (e.g., Buzzanell, 2005; Collins, 2019; Hays, 1996, Johnson & Swanson, 2007). Working mothers may also commonly experience high levels of role strain, work-family conflict, and negative

impacts to their mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2014, Kramer & Pak, 2018), as was the case in varying degrees for the breadwinner mothers in this research. However, on the more positive side, the findings of this research suggest that increased control, autonomy, and flexibility experienced in relation to the worker role while remote working may have buffered some of the negative aspects of going into a physical workspace. Further, experiences of learning, growth, genuine relational connection, and fulfillment in more specific relation to their mother role may have also increased during this time, thereby serving to enhance their mother identities within the context of who they are holistically as extremely busy and nonstop hardworking breadwinner mothers.

Theme 4

The last theme, *Ambivalence about Breadwinner Status*, emphasizes, at core, that being a necessary and sustained breadwinner may be associated with a complexity of oscillating internal dynamics. As presented in Chapter 3, the swinging pendulum characterizing this dynamic of ambivalence— at times on the side of feelings of empowerment, strength, and capability, and at other times, feelings of self-doubt, guilt, and failure—was fueled by a range of factors, including economic constraints, relationship issues, and cultural and social pressures around traditional gender role norms. Moreover, added stressors during the pandemic via the intensified juggling act appeared to amplify the relative noise of these dynamics. For a few participants, this was viewed as a contributing factor in the dissolution of their marriages during the pandemic.

As reviewed in Chapter 1, only a few studies have focused on the lived experiences of breadwinner mothers (Chesley, 2017; Medved, 2016; Meisenbach, 2009).

To my knowledge, this is the first qualitative study of its kind to examine in-depth the experiences of breadwinner mothers during the pandemic around remote working and facilitating remote schooling for their young children. As noted, nearly all participants in this study could be characterized as necessary breadwinners in that their families were reliant on their portion of income, and all but one identified as sustained breadwinners. Given this, one might reasonably expect participants to have exemplified more secure or stable attitudes in relation to this status and role. Yet, the stories told about what this role was like for them were typified by significant internal ambivalence. In a quite a few cases, these stories revolved around major interpersonal conflicts, most often with spouses or other family members. The hallmark characteristic of ambivalence exhibited by these breadwinning mothers might be explained in light of prior research findings examining public perceptions of breadwinner mothers.

As noted by Wang et al. (2013), the public has shown conflicted feelings about the rise of breadwinner mothers as a historical trend over the last few decades, with a slight, but very significant, majority (51%) agreeing with the view that mothers should stay at home with their children rather than work outside the home. Inherent to this view appears to be essentialist attitudes about mothers as caregivers and not workers (Hays, 1996; Forbes et al., 2020a; Forbes et al., 2020b), in spite of a long history of women's labor outside the home, especially among immigrants and other women of color (Collins, 2009; Coontz, 1997; Giele, 2008), and highlighting gendered discourses about paid and unpaid labor (Olmstead et al., 2009; Williams, 2010). Additionally, Wang et al. found that 60% of the U.S. public qualified the rise of single breadwinner mothers as a "big problem." Thus, it follows that if the larger public is conflicted about mothers serving as

family breadwinners, then participants who live their lives embedded within this larger social context would absorb and reflect conflict about themselves in this role.

Further, the public's attitudes about single mothers seems to corroborate the feelings of stigma that many of the single mothers in this research conveyed, many of whom characterized their role as breadwinners for their families as meaning that they had to work twice as hard. Several of the married breadwinner mothers expressed this view too, as well as perceived negative judgment on them due to nonconformity to traditional gender role norms. Overall, this finding suggests that, though mothers who are breadwinners may be taking steps towards "undoing gender" through nonconformity to gender role norms, internalization of these negative social evaluations may yield a heavy emotional toll.

Another prominent factor appeared to be feeling misunderstood because of perceived incongruence between how they viewed themselves in this role and how they believed others viewed them in this role. For participants, hearing repeatedly well-meaning adulations of their "superwoman" status seemed to add fire to the fuel around already ambivalent feelings, especially when these sentiments came without tangible offers of support. As stated by Laila, "it's not a badge of honor." For the breadwinner mothers in this research, explicit messages directed to them about how well they seemed to manage, especially when they experienced a different internal reality (whether accurate or not), was not generally received as complimentary. Instead, this type of well-meaning feedback contributed to not feeling seen or understood. As the oscillating dynamic at the heart of this theme suggests though, this is not to say that these mothers did not feel extremely strong, empowered, competent, and capable at times in managing all their roles

and responsibilities. On the contrary, many of the mothers in this research shared stories indicating that they had worked hard over time to fend off feelings of guilt in order to be able to own their “bad mamma jamma” selves, as playfully stated by Elle. Nevertheless, quite often the ability to claim and feel ownership of more positive feelings about being a breadwinner mother, such as increased confidence, involved fighting an internal dialectical battle that changed from day to day, and sometimes even from minute to minute.

Although all participants indicated that they were necessary breadwinners in their households, an examination of social class status relative to economics alone indicates that some participants were much more financially secure than were others. In other words, for some being a *necessary* breadwinner meant maintaining their standard of living within their households; for others, necessary breadwinning was a matter of survival. Consequently, financial worries were prominently discussed by lower middle class or working poor participants as among the most critical factors fueling internal dynamics of ambivalence. Moreover, economic constraints, together with heavy ‘second shift’ burdens, seemed to severely complicate narratives of empowerment around breadwinning for many of these participants. Although feelings of pride were commonly associated with being financially self-sufficient in the present, these were also accompanied by feelings of major worry and concern for the future. For example, one participant questioned the validity of feeling empowered when unable to save for retirement or leave a job that is hated. These mothers, in particular, exemplified what researchers have likened to a false optic of ‘choice’ for many working women (Canetto et al., 2017). Although Canetto and colleagues referred to working women’s career choices

in explicit connection to gender ideologies, the choice discourse may be particularly salient in the case of breadwinning mothers for whom being breadwinner is a matter of economic survival. For these participants, being the breadwinner was often viewed as a constraint to the ability to pursue other professional ambitions or opportunities, as well as tethered to major concerns about the future. Overall, the ambivalence connected with participants' breadwinner role supports the scholarship of Chesley (2017), Medved (2009), Meisenbach (2016), and others who found that breadwinner mothers clearly have a complicated relationship to how they view themselves in this role.

Implications for Counseling Practice and Training

Although this research honed in specifically on the lived experiences of *breadwinner* mothers in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings may have important implications for counselors, counselor educators, and other helping professionals related to the needs of many types of working mothers, whether breadwinners or not. Overall, this study reinforces calls for continued conversations around how best to support the wellbeing of working and breadwinning mothers, both generally and in the aftermath of the intensified challenges experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, counselors must be aware of the ways that work-life balance issues, both in general and during the pandemic, have posed considerable challenges to working and breadwinning mothers' physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Counselors must also be aware of the ways that work-life balance challenges may have especially intensified for working and/or breadwinning mothers of school-aged children during the pandemic because of increased role responsibilities together with constant toggling between various

technologies within a merged work and home space. This may have led to experiences of role strain, cognitive overload, and automatic functioning, with little time to process their experiences along the way. Trauma-informed approaches that incorporate tenets of mindfulness, narrative, and meaning-making may be particularly effective ways of helping working and breadwinning mothers sort out, reflect on, and create meaning of their experiences. To this point, feedback given by participants regarding the research interviews commonly conveyed the view that, for busy working and breadwinning mothers, having space and time to process experiences feels particularly elusive in general. This research suggests that the context of the pandemic further exacerbated this. Therefore, narrative and other meaning-making counseling approaches in which working mothers are enabled to tell their story may be particularly valuable.

Second, as this research also highlighted differential experiences of breadwinner mothers in relation to intersecting aspects of cultural and social identity, counselors are advised to refrain from using a one-size fits all approach, instead tailoring approaches to the unique needs of clients. Seen with regards to the double-edged sword of work and home life merging during the pandemic, needs for support and advocacy around work-life balance issues may significantly vary from person to person. Counselors are encouraged to use an intersectional lens to better understand and help working mothers explore how their unique personal and cultural backgrounds have shaped their experiences and conceptualizations of working motherhood. Moreover, because working and breadwinning mothers' experiences during the pandemic may have had consequences for various domains of functioning, including within their significant relationships and families, counselors should also consider whether the nature of concerns presented would

be best served by a particular mode of counseling, including individual, couples, family, or group counseling formats. For example, those attributing intimate partnership strains to working motherhood challenges may be best served within couples counseling contexts, whereas those who chronically experience misunderstanding, feelings of aloneness, or stigma related to general challenges of being a working or breadwinning mother may find support and empowerment in a group of others who share similar experiences and concerns.

Third, counselors are encouraged to take a systemic perspective in helping working and breadwinning mothers view the impact of dominant cultural ideologies, discourses, and sociopolitical structures in shaping their own internal dialectics around what it means to be a good mother, worker, and breadwinner. In addition to utilizing well-known feminist frameworks of counseling that can help illuminate influences of gender socialization (e.g., relational-cultural therapy [RCT]; Jordan, 2018; Empowerment Feminist Therapy [EFT]; Worrell & Remer, 2003), another approach that may be useful is the liberation health model (Kant, 2015). Developed within the field of social work, the liberation health model framework involves having clients analyze and understand the role that institutional, cultural, and personal factors have on mental health concerns using the 'liberation health triangle' tool in order to develop an action plan towards change. Using the liberation health model framework or other feminist approaches together with the analogy of the juggling act may be one creative way that counselors can help working mothers, either in individual, couples, or family counseling work, conceptualize their experiences in a way that explicitly includes seemingly invisible responsibilities, forces, and influences. For example, within couples counseling, counselors might introduce the

analogy of the juggling act to help both parties in the relationship better see and understand all of the balls being juggled, including the often invisible balls related to the less concrete and tangible aspects of family scheduling, organizing, school communications, and other areas. The juggling act analogy may also help to illuminate dynamics of over and under-functioning in the relationship so that consideration can be made to whether there are balls that can be tossed to the other partner, set down, or simply eliminated altogether. The juggling analogy can also be used to illuminate the relative quality of the underlying support structure for working mothers in our culture generally in order to help alleviate feelings of guilt and self-blame. To this point, counselors should be aware of how well-meaning advice to practice self-care might be viewed as another impossible ball to juggle, as well as inadvertently reinforce invisible sociopolitical structures that place out-sized responsibility on individuals while concurrently de-emphasizing social responsibility and support. One solution to this dilemma may be to reposition self-care within the concept of community care, as well as help clients reconceptualize self-care in ways that are personally meaningful and do-able.

Additionally, much has been said in media narratives and larger social discourse about how the pandemic has served to ignite re-evaluation of what matters most, such as in areas of career, personal relationships, or other areas of our lives. It may also have included examination of the ways that behaviors, habits, or coping skills, either developed during the pandemic or existing prior to that, served to promote wellbeing and work-life balance or diminish it. As findings of this research illustrated, several participants made major life changes to careers or relationships during the pandemic, and several more seemed to be contemplating major life changes based on re-evaluation of

their priorities, affiliations, and other habits. Keeping this in mind, counselors might also consider using the stages of change model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983) and other tools to help working and breadwinning mothers evaluate needs, priorities, and actions under consideration towards specific client-identified goals. For example, this might involve working with clients to increase advocacy skills so they can assert for more flex time at work in order to achieve a better work-life balance or increasing assertiveness with partners or spouses in order to achieve more egalitarianism in their relationships around domestic and childcare responsibilities. In the same vein, counselors are also encouraged to take a client-centered and contextual approach in examine potential impacts of the continued use of coping skills that may have developed during the pandemic, including in areas of physical activity, sleeping, eating, and consumption of alcohol. Counselors should take a posture of openness and nonjudgement when encouraging clients to explore habits and coping skills in a contextual manner, including exploration of how these activities might have served or not served personal and/or relational wellness, both during the pandemic and thereafter.

Findings of this research also point to the importance of a more inclusive and family-centered approach to addressing mental health needs within schools. Given the tremendous stressors placed on school communities as a result of the pandemic, school leadership and government should strongly consider the recommendations of Davis et al. (2021) to find ways to expand mental health services in schools, not just for students but for the people and family members who support and care for them as well.

Lastly, just as the participants in this study seemed to have absorbed and internalized gendered discourses of breadwinning leading to conflicting and ambivalent

feelings about themselves in this role, counselors should also work to identify and reflect on internalized attitudes, values, and beliefs that may affect their work counseling working and breadwinning mothers. For those who work with *breadwinner* mother clients in particular, this may be especially imperative given evidence of the high degree of stigma and negative public perceptions that breadwinner mothers continue to face, regardless of relationship status. Lastly, counselors and counselor educators can join advocacy efforts to push for legislation that fairly values the contributions of women's and mother's labor, both paid and unpaid, recognizing that, in the words of Kristof and WuDunn (2009), when women hold up half the sky, measures that support them benefit everyone.

Strengths and Limitations

In conducting this research, I employed rigorous procedures to ensure ethical and methodological integrity, including peer debriefing and reflexive journaling for examining positionality and bracketing biases, as well as using an external auditor and participant feedback (e.g., member reflections) to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Nevertheless, transferability in qualitative research is ultimately determined by the reader. Consistent with IPA methodologies, the construction of findings relies on the researcher's interpretative role, hence, information on my background, context, and positionality was presented transparently to the reader. This, together with extensive use of verbatim participant excerpts in the Results chapter, reflect the idiographic nature of IPA research and will enable the reader to determine the degree to which findings may resonate or transfer to their own circumstances. Therefore, counselors and counselor educators should consider the degree to which findings may

transfer to counseling and training contexts with consideration to the following study strengths and limitations.

First, although participants in this study were diverse in many respects (e.g., race/ethnicity, income level, family size, relationship status, job type), the sample was fairly homogeneous in several areas, including sexual orientation and educational attainment. All participants except two identified as heterosexual, and even though income brackets varied, the majority of participants held a Master's degree or higher. Moreover, even though participants worked in a variety of job types and industries in geographic regions across the United States, many worked in helping type professions and nearly all could be classified as professional class workers. Most also lived in urban or suburban areas within proximity to major metropolitan hubs. However, given that remote working during the pandemic was one of several inclusion criteria, sample homogeneity concerning worker role characteristics may largely be a function of the scope of focus in this research, including proximity to major cities because of job types. Consequently, findings of this study may not be transferable to breadwinner mothers from all types of backgrounds or experiences, such as those who identify as belonging to LGBTQ+ communities, those without college degrees, and those from rural areas.

Second, it is also a possibility that breadwinner mothers who experienced higher levels of duress or intensity during the pandemic may have felt more compelled to participate in this research than other breadwinner mothers. Therefore, self-selection bias may have influenced who ultimately completed the prescreening questionnaire and entered the selection pool. Although a possibility, two counterpoints should be noted that diminish the weight of this argument. First, as per thematic findings of this research, all

participants identified positive aspects of their experiences regarding the merging of work and home life domains. Second, interviews were conducted in Fall of 2021 just as a new variant of COVID-19 was beginning to surge, resulting in an uptick again of temporary school closures. As a result, breadwinner mothers under the highest levels of stress due to their intensified juggling would probably have been less likely to participate in this research rather than the converse.

Lastly, as per tenets of IPA methodologies, my own interpretive lens was integral to the construction of thematic findings. I used various means to promote transparency and trustworthiness of final themes constructed, including reporting of my own positionality and experiences pertaining to the topic, clear explanation of my methods, an external auditor, and participant feedback on the themes. Ideally more participants would have responded to the initial request for their reflections and feedback on final themes. Given the low initial response, the request was reformatted into a simple survey format, which yielded more responses. These responses provided little in the way of substantive qualitative feedback akin to the concept of member reflection, but did indicate overall agreement with final themes constructed.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is recommended in order to both build on the study strengths and findings, as well as address its limitations. To address study limitations related to demographic diversity while still keeping with the general foci of this study, research might shift the lens to focus more closely on the experiences of breadwinner mothers during the pandemic from particular groups not represented in this research, such as those with less education, those from rural areas, and LGBTQ+ identified breadwinner

mothers. Moreover, as the scope of focus in this study related to concurrent remote working and facilitating remote schooling for elementary-school aged children specifically, researchers might also look more closely at the experiences of breadwinner mothers of either younger (pre-school aged) or older (high-school aged) dependent children who managed caretaking responsibilities while also working remotely during the pandemic. Alternatively, whereas this research examined the experiences of a relatively privileged group of mothers who were *able* to remain employed while remote working, research is also needed to better understand the experiences of mothers, whether breadwinners or not, who either chose to leave jobs or careers (i.e., those who became part of the '*she-cession*'), as well as the many mothers who worked in 'essential' jobs, such as grocery store workers, health care workers, factory workers, cleaning and janitorial staff, and so on.

Future research using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies might also build on the thematic findings of this study via further exploration of a number of different areas. Pertaining to findings exemplified by the first theme, research is needed to better understand the specific impacts of cognitive overload, role strain, perceived role quality, and facets of work-life balance on working and/or breadwinning mothers' personal wellbeing and relationships. Further, as technology continues to develop and remote working increasingly becomes the norm, studies will be needed to investigate the impact of technology use and remote working on a variety of areas under the umbrella of work-life balance, including role quality, role strain, cognitive focus, and overall mental health and wellbeing. Moreover, given findings linking the experiences of parents' 'proxy education' experiences during the pandemic to negative mental health symptoms,

researchers can continue to build on these findings by examining whether specific groups of parents might have experienced disproportionate impacts in order to justify means of triaging mental health services to the families and communities where it is most needed. Further research in this vein could also serve to substantiate claims for expanding mental health supports in schools to be more inclusive of all family members.

Future research might also seek to further tease out the experiences of breadwinner mothers around both positive and negative feelings linked to this role, such as confidence, empowerment, guilt, and self-blame, as well as the ways they perceive that social, relational, and cultural factors (e.g., partners' self-perceptions; economic constraints or opportunities) influence these feelings and self-perceptions. Further, as many of the participants identified spouse/partner perceptions as having a significant impact on how they viewed themselves in this role, especially given gendered discourses related to breadwinning, further research might focus attention to the experiences of the non-breadwinner partner or spouse regarding their role in relationship to the breadwinner mother and/or partner. Given that participants in this study were sustained breadwinners who demonstrated ambivalence about their occupation of this role, research might also seek to better understand the circumstances around which the breadwinner role becomes a more integrated and resolved part of one's identity. Researchers might also seek to better understand the experiences of married/partnered mothers who, opposite the experience of many mothers who left jobs to stay home and care for their children during the pandemic, became the family breadwinners at this time due to a spouse or partner's job loss.

Lastly, following recommendations of Jackson and Slater (2017), Lamar and Forbes (2020), and Schwarz (2017), counselor researchers should continue to assess the effectiveness of counseling strategies that have been frequently promoted for use with women, but specific to the needs and wellbeing of working and breadwinning mothers. These include theoretical approaches and strategies rooted in feminist frameworks, such as RCT and EFT, as well as the liberation health model, mindfulness strategies, and other approaches. These and other counseling approaches can be examined to determine how well they serve to increase awareness of cultural and social contexts; build skills in areas of assertiveness and empowerment; decrease feelings of guilt, self-blame, failure, and perfectionistic tendencies; claim feelings of strength, capability, confidence, and empowerment; and help clients assert, negotiate, and advocate for needs with partners/spouses, children, other family members, and employers.

Conclusion

Abundant research has attested to the stressors that working mothers have long faced in juggling their multiple roles and responsibilities, along with internal and external expectations, ideologies, and other competing pressures around what it means to perform well in each of these roles. These stressors pose a considerable challenge to work-life balance ideals, and often lead to negative consequences for working mothers' physical and mental health. Breadwinner mothers of dependent aged children constitute a rising share of mothers in the United States who must also juggle the weighty ball of financial provision and responsibility for their families. This study appears to be the first in-depth phenomenological investigation that specifically focused on the experiences of *breadwinner* mothers within the United States who navigated remote working and remote

schooling during the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using methods of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), and undergirded by frameworks of intersectionality and “doing” and “undoing gender” theories, it was my intention to illuminate both the common and differential experiences of a diverse group of breadwinner mothers who shared a common set of experiences during the pandemic.

Findings demonstrated that, for these necessary and sustained breadwinners, the challenges experienced intensified their already very complicated work-life balance juggling act. The findings lend support to research and literature indicating that working and breadwinning mothers commonly fulfill a role of outsized responsibility in caretaking and decision-making within the domestic arena in ways that are often invisible, frequently leaving them feeling high levels of role strain, cognitive overload, and resulting in diminished focus to their own wellbeing or self-care. At the same time, this research demonstrated that, while concurrent juggling of remote working and overseeing children’s remote working was dutifully enacted as participants’ ultimate responsibility in their role as mothers, often with few external supports, they also perceived benefits as a result of these experiences. In some cases, this enabled re-evaluation of values, priorities, and affiliations, as well as contemplation of change or action towards new goals. Lastly, the dynamics of the pandemic appeared to highlight what I characterized as the hallmark of ambivalence related to their role as a breadwinner. As one of just a few studies to examine breadwinner mothers’ own perceptions of their experiences relative to this specific role, future research can continue to examine how breadwinner mothers perceive and understand themselves in relationship

to this role, especially given implications of this study around internalization of negative social evaluation and stigma.

Overall, this research highlighted both commonalities and differential experiences of breadwinning mothers particular to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings have important implications for counseling practice, advocacy, and research in order to continue to support the needs of working and breadwinning mothers women across individual, family, community, and organizational contexts in the aftermath of the pandemic and beyond.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Notice

VOLUNTEERS FOR RESEARCH STUDY NEEDED!

Are you a “breadwinner mom” who worked remotely and facilitated remote schooling for one or more elementary school-aged children during the COVID-19 pandemic?



As part of my qualitative dissertation, I am seeking to individually interview approximately 15 “breadwinner moms” from diverse backgrounds about the impact these experiences had on their daily lives and how they view their experiences in light of common social messages pertaining to motherhood, work, breadwinning, and other cultural identities. A secondary aspect of this research incorporates an arts-based component for selected participants who may be interested.

Who Can Participate?

In order to participate, you must be an adult (18 or older) and meet all three inclusion criteria:

- 1.) *Identify as a "breadwinner," defined for the purpose of this research as earning the majority share of household income (51-100%), whether single, married, partnered or co-living*
- 2.) *Worked remotely for at least some portion of time during the COVID-19 pandemic*
- 3.) *Are a mother to 1 or more elementary school-aged child (ages 5-12, or K-6th grade) who required remote schooling for at least some portion of time during the COVID-19 pandemic*

What is Involved:

Selected participants will complete an individual video interview, which will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will be recorded. You will also be contacted at a later time to provide follow-up feedback on the study’s preliminary findings. There are no major anticipated risks involved in participation, and you may discontinue the study at any time without penalty. If you are selected for an interview, you will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card to thank you for your time.

Click on the hyperlink or scan the QR code below to find out more information about the study and to complete the prescreening questionnaire!

<https://tinyurl.com/BreadwinnerMomsDuringCOVID>



This study has IRB approval from the University of Missouri-St. Louis and is being conducted by Rebecca D. Miller, Ph.D. Candidate, under the faculty supervision of Dr. Susan Kashubeck-West. If you have any questions, please contact Rebecca Miller at rdm8v9@umsystem.edu

APPENDIX B

Consent Form



College of Education
Division of Education Sciences and Professional Programs
Department of Counseling and Family Therapy

One University Blvd.
 St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499
 Telephone: 314-516-4970
 E-mail: counselingphd@umsl.edu

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities
 Breadwinner Mothers of School-Aged Children during COVID-19: An Interpretative
 Phenomenological Analysis

Participant _____ HSC Approval Number

Principal Investigator ___ Rebecca D. Miller _____ PI's Phone Number: (314) 896-4020

Summary of the Study

*This project is part of a qualitative dissertation research study and participation is voluntary.
*The purpose of this research is to examine the lived experiences of breadwinner mothers who navigated remote working and facilitating remote schooling for their elementary school-aged children during the COVID-19 pandemic.
*Selected participants will complete a <u>one-time semi-structured individual interview</u> that focuses on their experiences as breadwinner mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview will last approximately <u>60-90 minutes</u> , and will be video-recorded using a HIPAA compliant video platform (e.g., Zoom). Participants will also be contacted at a later time via email to provide feedback on the study's preliminary findings.
*The total possible time commitment, including prescreening and optional interview extension, is 80-120 minutes.
*There are no major risks involved in participation and you may discontinue the study at any time without penalty.
*There are no direct benefits to you.
*If selected for an interview, you will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card to thank you for your time.

Please read all of the below information carefully before you decide to participate in this study and proceed to the prescreening questionnaire.

Who are the researchers and what is the purpose of the research?

This research study is being conducted by Rebecca D. Miller, Ph.D. candidate in Counseling under the supervision of Doctoral Committee Chair, Susan Kashubeck-West. If you have questions about this study or need additional information, you may contact Rebecca Miller (Principal Investigator) by phone (314-896-4020) or by email at rdm8v9@umsystem.edu

The purpose of this research is to examine the lived experiences of breadwinner mothers who both worked remotely and facilitated remote schooling for at least one or more elementary school-aged child during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, this research aims to understand the impact these experiences had on their daily lives, as well as how they view these experiences in light of common social messages regarding motherhood, work, breadwinning, and other cultural identities.

Who is eligible?

In order to participate in this study, you must be an adult (ages 18 or older) and meet all three study inclusion criteria:

1. Identify as the household "breadwinner," defined for the purpose of this research as earning the greater share of household income (51-100%), whether single, married, partnered or co-habiting
2. Worked remotely for at least some portion of time during the COVID-19 pandemic
3. Are a mother to 1 or more elementary school-aged child (ages 5-12, or K-6th grade) who required remote schooling for at least some portion of time during the COVID-19 pandemic

What will my participation involve?

Study participation will involve:

- **Prescreening:** You will be asked to first complete the pre-screening questionnaire. This asks you questions about your demographic background, availability, and ensures that you meet all inclusion criteria. It will also enable the researcher to select a diverse set of participants for this research based on maximum variation sampling principles. This should take approximately 5 minutes.
- **Participant Selection:** The researcher will select up to 25 participants from the selection pool, based on order of survey completion, and with attention to demographic criteria (race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, relationship status) in order to ensure a diverse sample of participants. Once a participant has been selected, the researcher will reach out via email or telephone (based on stated preference) to schedule the individual interview.
- **Individual Interview:** If you are selected for an interview, the researcher will ask you questions about how you view yourself as a mother, worker, and breadwinner; how the circumstances of the pandemic impacted you as it pertains to each of these roles and in relation to your cultural identities; and how you have understood and made meaning of these experiences in your relationship to self and others.
 - All interviews will be conducted by Rebecca D. Miller, Principal Investigator.
 - Interviews will take place via Zoom, a HIPAA compliant video communication platform. This will require you to have access to a computer and internet

service. In limited cases, it may be possible to conduct the interview either by telephone or in-person.

- The interview is anticipated to last 60-90 minutes and will be video-recorded.
 - Additionally, when completing the pre-screening questionnaire, you will be asked whether you are interested and able to bring a personal image, artwork, or other object to the interview that in some way depicts your experiences as a breadwinner mother during the pandemic. If you agree, this may extend the interview time an additional 15 minutes, for a total of 75-115 minutes.
- **Participant Follow-Up:** After the interview, the researcher will follow-up at a later point by email to request your feedback and reflections on the preliminary findings.
- **Study Timeframe:** Participant recruitment and interviews will take place from June-August of 2021, or until all participants have been selected and interviews are completed. At this time, participants who were not selected will receive an email informing them that their interest in the study was appreciated, but that not everyone who met the selection criteria could be interviewed at this time.

Approximately 50 participants in total, including prescreening, may be involved in this research at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

- **Total Time Commitment:** If selected for an interview, the total amount of time involved in your participation will be approximately 80-120 minutes. Participants who are selected and complete the individual interview will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card as a thank you for their time.

Risks

There are no major anticipated risks involved in your participation. However, if at any point you experience negative thoughts or emotions that you experience as unmanageable, you are free to discontinue both the prescreening survey and/or the interview immediately and seek the support of a local mental health professional. If you need assistance with a referral, the researcher will help to provide you with one. Another potential risk is loss of confidentiality; however, the researcher will make all reasonable efforts to safeguard participant confidentiality throughout the entire research process, as described below in the Participant Confidentiality and Data Use section.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits for study participation.

Voluntary Participation

It is entirely voluntary to participate at all stages of this research study. You can decline participation in the study by not proceeding to complete the pre-screening questionnaire. Additionally, you are free to discontinue the pre-screening questionnaire at any time, or if selected for an interview, withdraw at any time or not answer any questions you do not wish to answer without penalty. Further, even if you complete the prescreening questionnaire and are contacted by the researcher for an interview, you can still decide that you no longer wish to participate. Please note that if you do not submit your prescreening questionnaire, your answers

will not be recorded and you will not be admitted to the selection pool and the researcher will not contact you for an interview.

Participant Confidentiality and Data Use

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study. Further, the researcher will take several steps to ensure your confidentiality. First, all identifying information from the pre-screening questionnaire will remain confidential and will only be available to the primary researcher. Second, if you are selected for a participant interview, you will be directed to select a pseudonym (fake name) at the start of the interview. Third, your identity will only be known by the primary researcher, who will conduct interviews via Zoom, which is HIPAA-compliant and requires participants to input a password to join the interview. Fourth, any research assistants who assist in the process of transcription, data analyses, and/or data review will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. Lastly, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked office, which will be maintained for a period of seven years after publication of the results.

In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection) that would lead to disclosure of your data as well as any other information collected by the researcher.

Researcher Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Rebecca Miller at rdm8v9@mail.umsl.edu or 314-896-4020 or the Faculty Advisor, Susan Kashubeck-West at SusanKW@umsl.edu. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the University of Missouri-St. Louis Office of Research Administration at 314-516-5897.

IRB Approval

This study was approved by the University of Missouri-St. Louis Institutional Review Board.

Please click the “Continue” button below if you agree that you have read this consent form, have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and wish to proceed to the pre-screening questionnaire. If you do not wish to proceed, please close your browser window. Please note that if selected for an interview, you will be asked to reaffirm consent.

CONTINUE

(for Qualtrics Survey)

APPENDIX C

Prescreening Questionnaire

Inclusion Criteria Questions

1. Do you hold primary household earner status, defined as earning the majority share (51-100%) of household income?

- Yes
 No (skip logic to inform participant they do not meet study inclusion criteria)

2. Were you employed in a job that required you to work remotely for at least some portion of time during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Yes
 No (skip logic to inform participant they do not meet study inclusion criteria)

3. Are you a mother of at least one or more elementary school-aged children (ages 5-12, grades K-6) who did remote schooling for at least some portion of time during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Yes
 No (skip logic to inform participant they do not meet study inclusion criteria)

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age? (Enter a whole number)_____

2. What is your race/ethnicity? (check all that apply)

- Black/African American Hispanic/Latino/Latinx
 White/European American Native American/Indigenous
 American
 Asian/Asian American Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

If the options above do not accurately describe you how you identify yourself, please share how you self-identify_____

3. What is your gender identification?

- female male non-binary transgender prefer not to say

If the options above do not accurately describe you how you identify yourself, please share how you self-identify_____

4. What is your sexual orientation (OR: do you consider yourself to be:)

- heterosexual or straight lesbian/gay bisexual prefer not to say

If the options above do not accurately describe you how you identify yourself, please share how you self-identify _____

5. What is your approximate annual household income?

- Less than \$10,000
 \$10,000-\$25,000
 \$25,000-\$50,000
 \$50,00-\$75,000
 \$75,000-\$100,000
 \$100,000-\$125,000
 \$100,000-\$125,000
 \$125,000-\$150,000+

6. What approximate percentage of your annual household income do YOU earn?

- 0-25%, less than a quarter (if selected, they do not meet study inclusion criteria)
 26-50%, or less than half (if selected, they do not meet study inclusion criteria)
 51-75%, or more than half
 76-100%, the significant majority or all

7. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Some high school
 High school diploma or GED
 Some college
 Associate's degree
 Bachelor's degree
 Master's degree
 Doctoral degree

8. Please indicate your religious/spiritual identification (check all that apply):

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Christian, Evangelical Protestant | <input type="checkbox"/> Christian, non-denominational |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Christian, Mainline Protestant | <input type="checkbox"/> Catholic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jewish | <input type="checkbox"/> Hindu |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Muslim | <input type="checkbox"/> Buddhist |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mormon | <input type="checkbox"/> Jehovah's Witness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agnostic | <input type="checkbox"/> Atheist |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spiritual, unaffiliated | <input type="checkbox"/> None |

If the options above do not accurately describe you how you identify yourself, please share how you self-identify _____

9. In which geographic region of the United States do you currently reside?

- Midwest- IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI
 Northeast- CT, DC, DE, MA, MD, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT
 Southeast - AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV
 Southwest - AZ, NM, OK, TX
 West - AK, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY
 I live outside of the USA, please specify where _____

10. Which best defines your relationship status?

- Married and living in same household with spouse
 Married, but not living in same household with spouse
 In a partnership/relationship, and living in same household
 In a partnership/relationship, but not living in same household with spouse
 Single, never married
 Single, divorced or separated
 Widowed
 Other (please specify): _____

11. Please indicate the number and ages of ALL children/dependents:

- Child #1 (fill in age): _____
 Child #2 (fill in age): _____
 Child #3 (fill in age): _____
 Child #4 (fill in age): _____
 Child #5 (fill in age): _____
 Child #6 (fill in age): _____

If you have additional children, please fill in their ages (separated by commas) in the box:

Interview Availability Questions

Please answer the following questions so the researcher can better understand your availability and preferences for an individual interview.

Please note that, if selected, the individual interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will be conducted via Zoom, which will require you to have access to a computer and the internet. In some cases, it may be possible to conduct the interview either by telephone or in person.

1. What are the best times for you to complete the individual interview. Please select ALL THAT apply.

- Weekday mornings
 Weekday afternoons
 Weekday evenings

- Weekend mornings
 Weekend afternoons
 Weekend evenings
 Other information about my availability: _____

2. Are you able and willing to complete the interview through Zoom?

This will require you to have access to a computer and internet service. You do not need to have a personal Zoom account. The researcher will send you a link to the Zoom meeting space and you will input a password.

- Yes
 No

***The following question only displays to individuals who answer NO to the above question**

2b. Please indicate how you would be able to participate in an individual interview (select all that apply):

- Telephone
 In-person

3. Would you be interested and/or willing to bring to the interview a personal photograph, artwork, or other object that in some way captures your experiences as a breadwinner mother during the COVID-19 pandemic?

If so, the researcher will ask you basic questions about the image/object, such as "What is happening in this image?" or "what does this object say about your experiences? Please note, that this may extend the interview time by up to 15 additional minutes, for a total of 75-115 minutes for the entire interview. Additionally, the researcher will separately request permission to photograph and/or obtain an electronic copy of the image for a follow-up research project.

If you select yes, the researcher will remind you to bring the image/object to the interview when contacting you to set up the interview. However, you can say yes now, but change your mind later.

- Yes
 No

4. Please provide your contact information so that, if selected, the researcher can contact you to arrange for the individual interview. You are free to omit your last name.

Name _____
 Email _____
 Telephone _____

5. Please indicate the best way to reach you to set up the interview

- Email
 Telephone
 Either is fine with me!

Thank you and Participant Selection Information

Thank you for participating in this prescreening questionnaire and affirming consent to participate in the interview, if selected.

The researcher will begin contacting participants from the selection pool based on order of survey completion, and with attention to diversity selection criteria in order to ensure as diverse of a final sample as possible.

If you are selected, the researcher will contact you either by telephone or email, based on your indicated preference. Recruitment into the selection pool will remain open either until the end of August 2021, or until all interviews have been completed. If you were not selected, you will receive an email informing you of this once data collection is complete.

Lastly, I would greatly appreciate it if you would share this survey with other eligible individuals you may know:

Survey link: <https://tinyurl.com/BreadwinnerMomsDuringCOVID>

Additionally, if you have any questions about this research whatsoever, please do not hesitate to contact me at the contact information below.

Sincerely,

Rebecca D. Miller
Ph.D. Candidate, University of Missouri-St. Louis
rdm8v9@umsystem.edu
(314) 896-4020

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol and Questions**Background Information (to be completed by researcher conducting the interview)**

Interviewer's name:

Participant's pseudonym:

Participant's assigned participant number:

Interview date:

Interview start and stop time:

Interview duration:

Interview location and type (e.g., phone, in-person, web-conferencing):

Interview completed reflexive journal (to describe reactions/biases/experiences):

Immediate File Back-Up to External Drive:

Date of interview transcription:

Date of transcript initial noting and development of emergent themes:

Date(s) transcription/preliminary themes sent to participant and participant confirmation?

Interview Protocol**Introduction**

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me about your experiences, _____. I imagine you are extremely busy and I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today.

Before we get started, I would like to confirm that you had a chance to read the informed consent document I gave you, to see if you have any questions (field participant questions). Also, (if participant agreed to bring art artifact), did you bring the art object that reflects your experiences as a breadwinning mother during Covid-19? Next, I would like to ask you to pick out your own pseudonym, such as a favorite name, or anything you would like. I will use this in the transcript and in the final report.

The interview should last between 60-90 minutes (or 75-115 minutes, if they brought artwork) and will be recorded for later transcription. If at any time you wish to stop the interview or to not answer a question you are completely free to do so without penalty. I will take all necessary precautions to protect your confidentiality.

After the interview is transcribed and I have conducted a round of preliminary data analysis to determine themes from your transcript, I will send you both these things by email to see if you would like to change, clarify, or add anything.

Before I hit the record button and we begin the interview do you have any questions?

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself as a mother generally (see probes below, pre-pandemic)

- a. *How did you come to be a mother, how many kids, etc.?*
 - b. *What did 'mothering' look like for you on a daily basis before the pandemic?*
 - c. *What personal beliefs, values, and/or identities influence how you mother?*
 - d. *What social/cultural values, beliefs, or expectations influence how you mother?*
 - e. *What relational, familial, community, or institutional supports do you utilize that are important to how you mother?*
2. Tell me about yourself as a worker (see probes below, pre-pandemic)
- a. *What type of job/career, how long in current job/career, etc.?*
 - b. *Before pandemic, what did your job look like for you on a daily basis?*
 - c. *What personal beliefs, values, and/or identities influence how you perform your job/work?*
 - d. *What social/cultural values, beliefs, or expectations influence how you perform your job/work?*
 - e. *What relational, familial, community, or institutional supports do you utilize that are important to how you perform your job/work?*
3. What is it like to be a breadwinning mother? (def: primary earner in your household)
- a. *How long have you been the primary earner in your household?*
 - b. *In what ways, if any, does being the primary earner influence:*
 - i. *How you view yourself?*
 - ii. *How others in your personal life view you (partner/spouse, children, other family)?*
 - iii. *How others in your professional life (work colleagues, supervisors, etc.) view you?*
4. What have your experiences as a breadwinning mother of school-aged children during the pandemic been like for you:
- a. *Describe the shifts that occurred and how it impacted you/your family (e.g., transition to remote working; school shutdowns/transition to remote schooling.)*
 - b. *How did the day to day routine change for you, your family?*
 - c. *How have these changes impacted you as a mother or how you mother/parent?*
 - d. *How have these changes impacted you as a worker (in job/career)?*
 - e. *How have these changes impacted you as a breadwinning mother?*
5. In what ways, if any, have your experiences during the pandemic influenced how you view or understand yourself:
- a. *As a mother?*
 - b. *As a worker (i.e. in job, career)?*
 - c. *As a breadwinning mother?*
6. In what ways, if any, have your experiences as a breadwinning mother during the pandemic impacted the way you view or understand your relationships to others?
- a. *Children*
 - b. *Partners/spouses (if applicable)*

- c. *Your work (Work/professional colleagues, supervisors)*
- d. *Other people (members of your social groups, other mothers, etc.)*

7. What has it been like sharing your experiences as a breadwinning mother during the pandemic with me?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share with me today?

Thank participant for their time and confirm contact information for member checking and to send gift card.

Option: Please bring a visual representation of what being a breadwinning mother (who has combined remote working and mothering of school-aged children at home) has been like during the pandemic. The visual representation can be something created (e.g., drawing, painting, collage) or something that you select and/or capture from your environment (e.g., found object, photograph).

Option for Interview Extension (15 minutes)

Image Meaning-Making

1. Thank you for bringing this image today. Please tell me about it.
 - a. What is happening in the image?
 - b. In what ways is your experience as a breadwinning mother during the pandemic reflected?
 - i. Probe for meanings or association to symbols, colors, imagery, etc.
2. What was the process of creating or selecting this image like for you?
3. Has talking about this image elicited any other feelings or thoughts about your experiences as a breadwinning mother during the pandemic that we have not already discussed?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share today (about image, yourself)?

Thank you again for helping me to better understand your experiences. The interview will be transcribed over the next several weeks, after which I will conduct preliminary analyses. I will email both the transcript and the themes back to you to see if I got it right, or if you would like to change, clarify, or add any information. This may take between 6-12 weeks.

Turn off recording device...

APPENDIX E

Follow-Up Online Questionnaire

Thank you for your prior participation the research study entitled, “*Breadwinner Mothers of School-Aged Children during COVID-19: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.*” I am greatly appreciative of the time you took to complete the interview! The following presents a summary of the most common themes identified across a majority of all 12 participants who completed interviews. I invite you to review the results below and provide me with as much or as little feedback as you wish. (Your interview transcript and a more detailed explanation of preliminary themes was previously sent to each of you individually by email). Please review the themes below and respond to the questions. There are only seven questions in total and I have tried to make it much easier to give feedback via checkboxes and optional text entry boxes. I am particularly interested in knowing how well you feel these themes align with your experiences, including if there are any areas that you do not feel characterize your experiences. However, any thoughts or feelings whatsoever are welcome! Also, please review your demographic information at the top of your transcript (see attachment in previously sent email) and correct any errors.

Thank you all again and I wish you all a happy and healthy 2022!

Rebecca Miller

Q1. Theme 1: Intensification of an Already Non-Stop and Exhausting “Juggling” Act

This theme indicates that participants largely experienced the initial phase of the pandemic while remote working and facilitating kids’ remote schooling (whether on own or in tandem with others) as marked by a high level of intensity and exhaustion, though not entirely dissimilar to their characterization of work-life balance prior to the pandemic.

How much or how little does this theme resonate for you?

(Please feel free to add any explanation in the field after your response)

- A great amount (1) _____
- A fair amount (2) _____
- A little (3) _____
- Not at all (4) _____

Q2. Theme 2: Left to One’s Own Devices, Figuratively and Sometimes Literally

This theme captures participants’ experiences at the pandemic onset related to their children’s remote schooling as largely parent guided, with either minimal and/or confusing directions from schools at least initially, resulting in them feeling largely on their own in navigating through this challenge. Additionally, the naming of this theme also incorporates the fact that many participants indicated having to use their own personal electronic devices, at least for some portion of time, while remote schooling their children, as well as often felt overwhelmed and under-resourced related to the device-based nature of remote schooling.

How much or how little does this theme resonate for you?

(Please feel free to add any explanation in the field after your response)

- A great amount (1) _____
- A fair amount (2) _____
- A little (3) _____
- Not at all (4) _____

Q3. Theme 3: Merging of Work and Home Life as a Double-Edged Sword

This theme focuses attention to the ways that participants described the merge of work and home life in one physical space as resulting in both unexpected challenges, but also new opportunities and unanticipated silver linings. Thus, all participants were easily able to point out and discuss both positives and negatives to their ‘intensified juggling act,’ akin to a double-edged sword.

How much or how little does this theme resonate for you?

(Please feel free to add any explanation in the field after your response)

- A great amount (1) _____
- A fair amount (2) _____
- A little (3) _____
- Not at all (4) _____

Q4. Theme 4: Ambivalence about Breadwinner Status

This theme reflects participants' mixed feelings and perceptions about their status and role as household breadwinners. These feelings came to the forefront during the pandemic because of increased role responsibilities, financial stressors, relational issues, and other factors. When participants described themselves in this role they fluctuated between positive emotions, feelings, and thoughts associated with their breadwinning role and negative or pessimistic feelings, thoughts, and emotions. This was often fueled by incongruence between internal and external perceptions of themselves in this role, feelings of chronic exhaustion due their role juggling, and their conflicting experiences related to larger social or family role expectations.

How much or how little does this theme resonate for you?

(Please feel free to add any explanation in the field after your response)

- A great amount (1) _____
- A fair amount (2) _____
- A little (3) _____
- Not at all (4) _____

Q5. Which theme(s) resonate with you most?

(check all that apply, and feel free to provide any explanation in the text entry box)

- Theme 1: Intensification of an Already Non-Stop and Exhausting "Juggling" Act (1) _____
- Theme 2: Left to One's Own Devices, Figuratively and Sometimes Literally (2) _____
- Theme 3: Merging of Work and Home Life as a Double-Edged Sword (3) _____
- Theme 4: Ambivalence about Breadwinner Status (4) _____

Q6. Which theme(s) resonate with you least?

(check all that apply, and feel free to provide any explanation in the text entry box)

- Theme 1: Intensification of an Already Non-Stop and Exhausting "Juggling" Act (1) _____
- Theme 2: Left to One's Own Devices, Figuratively and Sometimes Literally (2) _____
- Theme 3: Merging of Work and Home Life as a Double-Edged Sword (3) _____
- Theme 4: Ambivalence about Breadwinner Status (4) _____

Q7. Is there anything else you would like to add about any of the identified themes, the research process, topic, or your own experiences?

Your name or pseudonym selected for study (Optional)

APPENDIX F

De-identified Participant Coding Sheet

Research Question #1: *What were the experiences of breadwinning mothers of elementary school-aged children who worked remotely and facilitated remote schooling for their children during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Research Question #2: *How do these mothers make meaning of their experiences in relationship to themselves, others, and dominant cultural ideologies of work, motherhood, and breadwinning?*

Generation of codes based on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual levels of textual analyses

LIFE CONTEXT AS MOTHER, WORKER and WORKING MOTHER, and BREADWINNER		
Motherhood Generally:	Professional/Working Role and Working Motherhood	Breadwinner Role:
Motherhood as a non-stop role	Living out of values through professional role	Being breadwinner is a current necessity for family
Motherhood as constant occupier of psychological space	Parents as key influence on social values enacted through worker role (respect, dignity, social responsibility)	Not always the breadwinner in her marriage, but has been sustained primary breadwinner for several years
Motherhood as continuous emotional and cognitive labor	Positive influence and support of supervisor who is also a mother (flexibility, mentoring, role modeling)	Sole breadwinner for 9 months during pandemic
Motherhood is the central role among many roles	Working motherhood as a constant struggle	Spouse not an intentional SAHF, but due to employment ups and downs
Resisting cultural messages that mothers “can’t do it all” while also acknowledging weight of resistance	Parents as role models for working motherhood	Ambivalent about being breadwinner
Resisting cultural messages about motherhood, while also being aware of their internalization	Working for personal fulfillment and intellectual growth	Dreaming of not having to be the breadwinner
Demands of mothering often limits and subsumes personal identity and interests	Successful integration of mother and career roles is a constant juggling act	Benefited from emotional support from other breadwinner moms
Motherhood supports often cater to mother role, not personal identity or interests	Constant questioning of whether the juggling act is successful	Empowering, yet also super stressful
Mothers as primary caretakers of all household members (including spouse)	Working motherhood as a legacy and model for children	Breadwinning leaves little time or energy for personal interests or ambitions
Motherhood role involves continuous problem-solving	Work values influence mothering and vice versa: respect and social responsibility	Breadwinning as a challenge to relational presence
Moms as household CEO’s		Breadwinning connected to possible feelings of jealousy and guilt in marital relationship
Questioning whether inequities in household relate to personal issues of control		Others see her as having “a ton on my plate” as family breadwinner (overload of responsibility)
		Constant question of “how are you actually doing all that?” (Breadwinner moms still held to intensive mothering and managerial standards)
		Being breadwinner is an act of gender role resistance, but that in itself is another internal pressure to manage

PANDEMIC EXPERIENCES IN RELATION TO ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, and IDENTITIES
General Reflections and Characterizations:
Continuous toggle of work and remote school was extremely exhausting
Conflation of work and home space made psychological separation and boundaries difficult

An emotionally exhaustive cycle of entertaining and educating (“You have to laugh or cry or get really angry”, “A lot of time to fill”)		
Emotional labor of caregiving intensified (felt more consequentially than academic piece of having kids home)		
Worrying more about social-emotional impact on kids than the academic impact		
Just trying to get through the day, but feeling guilty about it		
Children don’t distinguish work mom from caretaking mom given primary nurturer role		
Remote Schooling	Remote Working	
Largely parent-guided/determined	Shifted work schedule around kids’ needs (working at inconvenient times, i.e. very early or very late)	
Minimal direction from school initially	Unconventional work spaces and scenarios (in car, on phone on street w/ child chasing her, while locked in bathroom, parking lots w/ free wifi)	
Sharing of family devices, internet crashing	Felt less motivated to work	
Types of school work (teacher phone calls, paper worksheets, virtual programs, zooms, Chromebook eventually)	Decrease in motivation exacerbated by ongoing pandemic uncertainties	
Husband facilitated much of kids’ remote schooling, but she was still in charge/oversaw kids’ academics (i.e., communicated w/ teachers, occasionally stepped in because of her primary nurturer role)	FFCRA- not considered because spouse was home with kids	
Personal Sacrifices	Psychological/Emotional Impacts	Strategies for Coping/Managing
Personal sacrificing of physical and emotional health in order to manage it all	Some events described in a way suggesting haziness, altered sense of passage of time	Requesting flexibility from work
Not having time to grieve personal losses	Little time to process things as they happened during the way	Working around kids’ needs (working late at night, weekends)
Cooking and cleaning (traditional gender role domains)- cooking outsourced (order take-out), cleaning just not done	Feeling stuck, guilty, and lost	Enforcement of physical space boundaries in home (locking doors)
	Feeling chronically exhausted (“more exhausted than afraid”)	Rearrangement of physical space in home
	Trying hard at everything, but still feeling like a failure (“I just felt like I was doing nothing right.”)	Drinking a glass of wine w/ spouse each night (to help de-stress, process, and laugh about events of day)
	Short-tempered and irritable	
	It’s not over: questioning when it will end (“I just want this to end. And we know how to end this. And people aren’t willing to do that.”)	
	Feeling disconnected socially	
	Characterized the whole of experiences as “traumatic” in retrospect	
Other unique situational/contextual factors and experiences during pandemic:		
Was already remote working, using co-working space		
Caretaking on both ends of lifespan (children and parents- part of “Sandwich Generation”)		
Contracted COVID-19 (self, 2 children, spouse)		
Succession of family losses (father prior to pandemic, mother during pandemic, but not due to COVID)		
Questioning of legalities and moralities at a time of human suffering (i.e., staff allowing her to be with mother in spite of protocols)		
Negative experience w/teletherapy where therapist did not have appropriate boundaries		
Child with learning difficulty (ADHD)		

PANDEMIC SILVER LININGS and ILLUMINATIONS:
Enjoyment of “the simple stuff” (impromptu picnic)
More time connecting with spouse, siblings got closer
A sense of collective connection through the enforced disconnection (“You’re just stuck. It’s not just us. It’s everybody, so.”)
The enforced slow-down of things enabled a shift in priorities
Clarity about what is crucial: Mothering role is paramount (“They’ll always come first. Really, nothing else can even come close.”)

Working hard at everything, but still feeling like efforts come up short ("I think I'm a good mom, I work my butt off, even though I just told you, like, I didn't think I was doing anything well.")
Resigned to be the breadwinner for now, but ambivalent about it (proud about it, but also jealous of others not in this role who seem to have more free time)
Breadwinner role in conflict with mothering role
Contemplating making a change: Stress of pandemic has made her consider what's next for her professionally ("I want to do more. I'm capable of more I'm not using my gifts professionally in the way that I know I could be...")

APPENDIX G

Thematic Recurrence Chart

Preliminary Themes	Participant Pseudonyms- Abbreviations											
	“Ga”	“Ka”	“H”	“L”	“Ge”	“Ko”	“MP”	“M”	“SL”	“E”	“N”	“RJ”
#1: Intensification of the Non-Stop Juggling Act	✓+	✓-	✓+	✓+	✓+	✓	✓	✓	✓+	✓-	✓+	✓+
#2: Left to One’s Own Devices	✓	✓	✓	✓+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓+	✓	✓	✓
#3: The Toll of Internal Dialectics	✓	✓-	✓+	✓+	✓+	✓		✓-	✓+	✓	✓+	✓-
#4: Work-home life integration as a double-edged sword	✓+	✓	✓+	✓+	✓	✓-	✓	✓-	✓+	✓-	✓+	✓
#5: Mothering Matters Most	✓+	✓+	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓+	✓	
#6: Ambivalence about Breadwinner Status	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓-	✓	✓-	✓+	✓	✓+	✓
#7: Recognition of Relative Privileges			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓+	✓	✓
#8: Re-evaluation of Priorities and Movement towards Change		✓			✓+		✓+	✓		✓+		✓
#9: Telling the Story: Realizations of its Traumatic Impact	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓+	✓+

✓+ indicates that theme is present to a significant degree

✓ indicates that theme is present

✓- indicates that theme is present, but to a lesser degree