Changed Landscape, Unchanged Norms: Work-Family Conflict and the Persistence of the Academic Mother Ideal

Karyn E. Miller[1] · **Jacqueline Riley[1]**

Abstract

Extensive research suggests that ideal worker and mothering expectations have long constrained academic mothers' personal and professional choices. This article explores how academic mothers experienced their dual roles amid the unprecedented shift in the work-life landscape due to COVID-19. Content analysis of questionnaire data (n = 141) suggests that academic mothers experienced significant bidirectional work-life conflict well into the fall of 2020. Increased home demands, such as caring for young children and remote schooling, interfered with their perceived capacity to meet ideal academic norms, including a singular focus on work, productivity standards, and their ability to signal job competency and commitment. Likewise, work demands reduced their perceived ability to meet ideal mothering norms, such as providing a nurturing presence and focusing on their children's achievement. Academic fathers experienced increased demands on their time but primarily described intrarole conflict within the work domain. Despite a pandemic landscape, ideal academic and mothering norms remained persistent and unchanged. The article concludes with implications for policy and practice in higher education.

Introduction

> *The ideal worker and the good mother are ideologically incompatible. You can be one or the other. There is no space to be both.* (Cooper, 2020)

Prior to the mass exodus of women from the paid workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic (Boesch & Phadke, 2021), women's representation in the labor force

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✉ Karyn E. Miller
karyn.miller@tamuc.edu

[1] Department of Curriculum & Instruction, Texas A&M University-Commerce, Commerce, TX, USA

had risen dramatically since the early 1960s. Half a century ago, 20% of mothers participated in the paid labor market (Williams & Boushey, 2010). By 2019, the share of working mothers had grown to 72.3% (Kashen et al., 2020), an increase of 261.5%. Despite the remarkable shift in labor market demographics, extensive research suggests that industrial-era institutional norms of the "ideal worker" and societal norms of the "good mother," both of which inform women's role expectations, have remained relatively unchanged and incompatible (Blair-Loy, 2003; Blair-Loy et al., 2015; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012).

As the percentage of women in the workforce has grown, the persistence of traditional ideal worker norms, motherhood expectations, and caregiving bias have shaped work expectations and practices around hiring, pay, and promotion, often leading to differential gendered outcomes (Weingarten et al., 2021) and increased work-life conflict for working mothers (Owens, 2018). In academia, family demands are often cited as barriers to academic women's career progression and representation in the highest leadership positions (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Mason & Goulden, 2004; Mason et al., 2013; Wolfinger et al., 2008), where "think leader, think male" (Hannum et al., 2015, p.73) cultures reinforce the ideal worker norm of constant devotion to work (Sallee, 2012; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2015). Academic mothers are more likely to cite family-related reasons for leaving academia (Martinez et al., 2017), contributing to the underrepresentation of women in senior faculty and administrative positions (Durodoye et al., 2020; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012). While calls to change the culture of academia in ways that recognize the dual responsibilities of academic mothers have been plentiful, they have largely gone unheeded (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Monroe et al., 2008; White, 2005; Winslow & Davis, 2016).

Amid institutional and societal resistance to paradigm shifts (Meadows, 1999), COVID-19 provided an external and unanticipated shock to established work and home landscapes and brought the incompatibility of the ideal worker and good mother norms to the foreground. With childcare and schools closed, working parents, especially mothers, experienced sharp increases in their workloads as they attempted to balance their professional lives with full-time work as their children's caretakers and teachers (Thomas et al., 2020; Williams, 2020). Concurrently, many workplaces quickly transitioned to remote work environments. In higher education, institutions adopted practices that they have long resisted, such as telecommuting and online teaching and learning (Williams, 2020). In response, women in academia disproportionately reported increased workloads and heightened work-life conflict (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020).

The impact of the pandemic's jolt to existing work and home systems can be understood at two levels of response, the institutional and the individual; this study focuses on the latter. Specifically, it explores how academic mothers experienced work-life conflict amid the pandemic relative to ideal academic and mothering norms and compares their experiences to those of academic fathers. Although the focus is on academic mothers, the study's exploration of gendered norms in higher education requires some understanding of fathers' experiences navigating pandemic-induced work and home demands within an institution that has historically been "by and for men" (Young, 2015, p. x), an ethos that has penalized mothers and provided

remunerative benefits for fathers, especially at the top of the income distribution (Budig, 2014; Correll et al., 2007; Hodges and Budig, 2010; Mason et al., 2013). We find that, despite profound changes to the landscapes of home and work, academic mothers' experiences of work-life conflict were 1) framed within unchanged ideal academic and good mother norms and 2) more intense relative to academic fathers.

Literature Review

Industrialization radically changed the workforce, in part, by creating deeply segmented work and family domains (Clark, 2000). Although the specific norms and expectations associated with each domain vary by profession and gender, work-life conflict arises when an individual confronts challenges meeting role expectations in one or both domains due to insufficient time, energy, and commitment (Kahn et al., 1964). Although work-life conflict can include non-work roles and responsibilities unrelated to family life, we follow Kossek and Lee's (2017) use of "work-life" and "work-family" interchangeably as "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). This section reviews the literature on role expectations for academic mothers, work-life conflict within higher education, and academic parents' experiences of work-life conflict amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Academic Mothers' Dual Role Expectations

Like professional women in various sectors, academic mothers contend with conflicting ideal role expectations. The concept of the ideal worker in white-collar professions stems from 20th-century factory expectations for productivity (Davies & Frink, 2014). Central characteristics of the ideal worker include a singular focus on work (Correll et al., 2014; Kelly et al., 2010) and prioritizing work above all else (Davies & Frink, 2014; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). The ideal worker is continuously available, and either does not have significant domestic duties (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2001) or arranges their household responsibilities outside of paid work (Bailyn, 1993). The ideal worker is traditionally male and has a wife to care for children (Carney, 2009; Davies & Frink, 2014; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). Organizations may also perceive childless women to be more stable employees with more time to dedicate to work relative to mothers (Blair-Loy, 2004; Hamilton et al., 2006). As workplace cultures have developed around ideal worker norms, the ideal worker has become someone who reinforces traditional norms and does not attempt to change the existing workplace culture (Weingarten et al., 2021).

Industrial-era ideal worker norms that reward a singular focus on work, long hours, availability, and productivity still drive universities' 'up or out' tenure and promotion practices (Ahmad, 2017). The ideal academic must follow a schedule that is "'extremely exhausting' in the pursuit of merits and maximum productivity" (Carpintero & González Ramos, 2018, p. 6) and must prioritize work above all

other concerns (Williams, 2005). According to Lund (2012), the ideal academic is "disembodied and reproduces a public–private dichotomy" and maintains "quality journal publications as the most central feature of this construct" (p. 219). While the ideal academic expectation is unattainable for many (Lund, 2012), academia's expectations for publishing, particularly in top-tier journals, is biased against women faculty who often take on heavier service and teaching loads (Babcock et al., 2017; Guarino & Borden, 2017). Academic mothers, in particular, suffer from a "bias against caregiving" (Drago & Colbeck, 2003) and are considered non-ideal academics (Eversole et al., 2007). This bias can inform the tenure and promotion process, which some faculty perceive as opaque, inconsistent, and subject to senior faculty's arbitrary desires and decisions (Ambrose et al., 2005). Given this subjective element, the ideal academic must signal to colleagues her devotion to work and conceal caregiving responsibilities (Manchester et al., 2013).

Simultaneously, academic mothers confront ideal mother norms, which center the role of mothers' loving, nurturing presence in children's development (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). While working mothers have historically taken the "second shift" of caregiving at home after paid work (Hochschild, 1989), norms surrounding what that work should look like have shifted. Douglas and Michaels (2005) document the rise in the 1980s of intensive mothering norms in the media, which presented the ideal mother as one with "infinite patience and constant adoration" (p. 2). Increasingly, mothers are expected to pour time and energy into their children's enrichment and achievement activities (Williams & Boushey, 2010), to the extent that mothering norms have come to resemble a competitive sport (Douglas and Michaels, 2005). Ishizuka (2019) finds that intensive parenting norms have become more prevalent and consistent across social class and various parenting situations over time. While parenting expectations regarding time and "concerted cultivation" have increased for men and women alike, men are still primarily perceived as the primary breadwinners and experience reduced time expectations for intensive parenting (Ishizuka, 2019; Slaughter, 2012).

Work-Life Conflict in Academia

For higher education faculty, the conflict between work and family is often bidirectional, with involvement in each domain negatively impacting the other, particularly for women (Fox et al., 2011). Faculty have noted how "work hours [have] crowded out the rest of their lives" (Misra et al., 2012, p. 309), with extended hours posing a challenge for parents who wish to spend time with their children (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004). For example, 44% of faculty mothers and 34% of faculty fathers reported missing some of their child's important events because they did not want to appear uncommitted to their work (Colbeck & Drago, 2005).

Academic parents experience significant levels of work-family conflict (Fox et al., 2011; Wilton & Ross, 2017); however, mothers disproportionately experience decreased work-life balance, stress, and sacrifice that stem from the ideal academic and motherhood norms (Wilton & Ross, 2017). They spend more time tending to family duties than academic fathers (Colbeck & Drago, 2005) and are more likely

to cite domestic responsibilities as the primary cause of work-life conflict (Elliott, 2003). While academic fathers report that work typically interferes more with family, mothers experience significantly higher levels of conflict in both directions (Fox et al., 2011).

Work-Life Conflict among Academic Mothers amid the Pandemic

Amid the pandemic, research suggests that significant gaps in work developed between parents and nonparents (Schieman et al., 2021). Within dual-income households with children, mothers were more likely than fathers to increase caregiving and housework responsibilities while working (Thomas et al., 2020). Among academic faculty, Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2021) did not find substantial work differences between men and women, until parenthood was accounted for; academic mothers reported significant increases in childcare and housework, more disruption to their daily schedules, and increased work-life conflict. Similarly, survey data indicates that academic mothers spent more time caring for their families and less time on research (Deryugina et al., 2021; Jung, 2020). In academia, gender and the presence of young children at home were the most significant predictors of research disruptions (Myers et al., 2020). While some academics found that lockdowns and remote work created a quiet space and unhurried pace, which allowed for the "slow-time" required for creativity, writing, and scholarly production (Eriksen, 2001; Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003), academic mothers reported significant work-life challenges as they struggled to meet dual role expectations (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2020).

Research Questions

1. What were academic mothers' experiences of work-life conflict relative to ideal academic and mother norms?
2. How did these experiences of work-life conflict differ for academic fathers?

Research Design and Methods

Author Positionality

Both authors are academic mothers with young children. Our experiences navigating the personal and professional disruptions brought by COVID-19 and numerous conversations with colleagues, men and women alike, revealed that academic parents within our spheres felt overworked and overlooked, especially as the months passed and the fall 2020 semester began. Our efforts to advocate for academic caregivers at our institution amid the pandemic deepened our desire to understand the work-life demands, concerns, and consequences experienced by academic parents more broadly and motivated our study.

Recruitment and Participants

In mid-October 2020, we posted a message with a questionnaire link to a prominent (30,000 + members) higher education Facebook group. This public group includes part and full-time faculty and represents diversity in gender, race, ethnicity, career rank and stage, discipline, school type, and geographic areas. Although the group is international, a review of recent posts and discussions suggested that most active contributors were from the United States. We invited members who identified as higher education faculty and caregivers, broadly conceived, to complete an online questionnaire, posted a reminder message four days later, and continued to bump the questionnaire link as we responded to comments. Frequent review of participation analytics indicated that group members who wanted to participate in the study did so within two weeks, at which time we closed the survey.

288 respondents completed at least part of the survey. After excluding respondents with no responses to any of the open-ended questions, data collection yielded complete data for 171 participants, including mothers, fathers, and caregivers of adults. Given the research questions, the sample was restricted to academic parents in the United States with children between zero and 18. Only three individuals self-identified as gender non-binary or other. Given this small representation and our focus on traditional gender norms, we analyzed our data using the gender binary. The final sample includes 141 participants. Table 1 provides a summary of the institutional characteristics associated with participants.

Table 1 Sample demographics by gender, institutional characteristics

		Academic Mothers		Academic Fathers	
		N	%	N	%
Institution Type	Community or technical college, 2-year	25	18.5	–	–
	Community or technical college, 4-year	2	1.5	–	–
	Private, 4-year university	39	28.9	3	42.9
	Private, Graduate School	1	0.7		
	Public, 4-year university	68	50.4	4	57.1
Institution Size	Less than 2,500	25	18.5		
	2,501–5,000	21	15.6	2	28.6
	5,001–10,000	19	14.1	2	28.6
	10,001–20,000	27	20.0	1	14.3
	20,001 +	43	31.9	2	28.6
Research Type	R1	34	25.4	2	28.6
	R2	14	10.4	1	14.3
	R3	21	15.7	1	14.3
	No research designation	65	48.5	3	42.9
Total Sample		134	100	7	100

The majority reported working at a 4-year public or private institution (80.9%). R1 research universities accounted for a quarter (25.5%) of the represented institutions. Table 2 provides a summary of the sample's characteristics by gender.

Participants held various academic faculty positions, although most were on tenure-track or tenured (59.6%), and represented the social sciences (40.4%), natural and applied sciences (25.5%), and humanities (22.3%). The majority of participants identified as Caucasian (85.1%). The largest share of the participants had 1 or 2 children (83.7%) with the age of their youngest child ranging from 0–2 years old (23.4%), 3–6 (36.9%), 7–10 (24.1%), 11–14 (12.1%), and 15–18 (3.5%).

Table 2 Sample demographics by gender, personal characteristics

		Academic Mothers		Academic Fathers	
		N	%	N	%
Academic Discipline	Business	8	6.0	1	14.3
	Humanities	31	23.1	1	14.3
	Natural and Applied Sciences	35	26.1	1	14.3
	Other	6	4.4	1	14.3
	Social Sciences	54	40.1	3	42.9
Faculty Position	Adjunct	17	12.6	1	14.3
	Instructor	13	9.6	–	–
	Professional/non-tenure-track	24	17.8	1	14.3
	Tenure-track, untenured	31	23.0	3	42.9
	Tenured	48	35.6	2	28.6
	Other	2	1.5	–	–
Number of Children	1	47	35.1	5	71.4
	2	65	48.5	1	14.3
	3	20	14.9	–	–
	4	2	1.5	1	14.3
Age of Youngest Child	0–2	29	21.6	4	57.1
	3–6	51	38.1	1	14.3
	7–10	34	25.4	--	--
	11–14	16	11.9	1	14.3
	15–18	4	0.03	1	14.3
Race/Ethnicity	Asian or Pacific Islander	4	3.0	–	–
	Black or African American	5	3.7	–	–
	Caucasian or White	113	83.7	7	100
	Hispanic or Latino/a	7	5.2	–	–
	Multiracial or Biracial	3	2.2	–	–
	Native American or Alaskan Native	1	0.7	–	–
	Other	2	1.5	–	–
Total Sample		134	100	7	100

Questionnaire Instrument

The instrument consisted of ten demographic and six open-ended questions. Demographic questions captured respondents' gender, race, ethnicity, caregiving status, and employment details. The open-ended questions focused on participants' ability to meet professional expectations, their sense of well-being, desired and received university support, and career concerns. They also provided an opportunity for respondents to share experiences not explicitly asked about on the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

We used qualitative content analysis to investigate academic mothers' "perceptions, feelings, knowledge, and behavior" amid the pandemic-induced shift in the work-life landscape (Guest et al., 2012, p. 8). Both authors provided a first-level read-through of the open-ended responses to gain an overall sense of the data and initially identify relevant text passages (Bowen, 2009). We kept individual researcher notes as we read and compared our initial impressions. The first author performed the first round of categorical coding as a predominantly inductive process (Thomas, 2006). The second author completed the second round of coding and verified existing codes. We adjusted and refined our coding schema as we coded, took notes, and discussed emerging patterns. Both authors conducted a final round of coding using codes derived from the literature and the data and compared survey responses to our final coding framework to check for accuracy. Table 3 provides the final coding framework. We completed all qualitative data analysis using the web-based program Dedoose.

Table 3 Coding framework

Domain	Role Code/Sub-codes
Work Domain	Singular focus on work
	• Prioritizes work
	• Continuously available
	• Arranges outside responsibilities around work
	Quality research production
	Signals devotion to work
	• Reputation
	• Peer perceptions
	• High student, colleague, and supervisor evaluations
Family Domain	Nurturing presence
	Concerted cultivation
	Focus on children's achievement
	Competitive sport

Results

Our results indicate that academic mothers experienced significant bidirectional work-life conflict amid the pandemic. They broadly framed their experiences of work-life conflict within ideal academic and mothering norms. Study participants perceived that pandemic-induced work demands interfered with their ability to meet ideal mothering expectations, mainly providing a nurturing presence and focusing on their children's achievement. Conversely, academic mothers also perceived that their increased home demands conflicted with their ability to meet ideal academic norms, including a singular focus on work, productivity standards, and sufficient signaling behavior. In contrast, academic fathers described intra-role conflict within the work domain but prioritized one role, reducing work-life conflict.

Work to Family Conflict: Falling Short of Ideal Mothering Norms

Nurturing Presence

Academic mothers expressed concern about how increased work demands affected the time they had available to spend with their children, both in quantity and quality. As one academic mother observed, the increased time required for online course preparation, grading, and availability to students, "has significantly cut into the time that is allocated for my daughter. Even though both her parents are at home, she has too much time she is left without us in a valuable way." An adjunct mother with a small child identified a similar conflict, "I feel scattered, constantly pressured to keep up with student questions at all hours, and like I'm not very engaged with my family." Working from home blurred the boundaries between work and family; in doing so, one academic mother noted that it became "easy to ignore the need for quality time and focused caregiving."

Academic mothers also worried about the tone they took with their children and their ability to meet their emotional needs. A tenure-track faculty mother in the humanities confessed feeling, "short-tempered with my son because he is resisting homeschool and I don't have the energy to play with him all day." Amid her elementary-aged child's increased social and emotional needs, an instructor at an R1 university described how, "I'm simply not that available as work takes me much more effort than it used to." Study participants expressed guilt over their perceived inability to provide a consistently nurturing presence. As an instructor and mother to an 11-year-old daughter commented:

> I feel guilty when I am crabby with my daughter. I feel guilty when I need to complete work instead of spending time with her. I feel guilty that she often feels she comes second or third in my life, when that couldn't be further from the truth. I feel guilty that I don't have the tools to give her to make navigating the pandemic easier. I hate that she has cried more in the last seven months than in the last few years.

As a result of trying to meet work expectations, particularly in regards to teaching and service to students, academic mothers described not only a lack of time for quality caregiving but a sense that, as a tenured mother with a preteen and teenager stated, "I'm neglecting my children." Faced with creating new online course content, a tenure-track faculty mother of two small children shared, "My children will suffer. I cannot be a good mother and good teacher simultaneously."

Focus on Children's Achievement

Regardless of their children's age, academic mothers expressed concern about their ability to focus on their academic achievement amid remote schooling. A professional-track mother at a private university noted how, "it is exceptionally difficult to find time to both oversee my children's work and perform my own." In many cases, attention to work demands trumped children's schooling needs. Despite her children's return to in person learning in the fall, a tenure-track humanities professor described how, when COVID exposure led to a two-week quarantine and remote schooling for her kindergartner, she felt compelled to prioritize work over her child's participation in synchronous learning, "I've told his teacher that he may miss some Google meetings, because of my work." Another tenure-track mother of two 11–14 year olds shared, "I worry about the consequences for my children's education—am I able to give them enough support?" Lastly, academic mothers of teenagers also expressed disengagement in their children's schooling due to work demands. According to a tenured mother with a high schooler, "I'm not doing any caregiving. No time. If my son was younger, I would be in a bind. He is left to his own devices most of the time…I had no idea how my kid was doing with his own schooling last semester."

Family to Work Conflict: Falling Short of Ideal Academic Norms

Singular Focus on Work

Study participants described how home responsibilities and children's needs prevented them from devoting focused time to work demands. A tenured professor in the natural and applied sciences with elementary and middle school children wrote, "I have no time/space to think or write. I can get things done in chunks, but being home with kids, while I am grateful I can, is very distracting." For academic mothers with young children, it was virtually impossible to manage caregiving and work simultaneously. According to a tenure-track academic in the natural and applied sciences, "if I try to work when my toddler is awake, something that should take 20 min to complete may take half the day due to frequent interruptions." Academic mothers with school-aged children also described how needing to be constantly available to their children interfered with a concentrated and sustained focus on work. A tenured social scientist at a large, public university with two elementary-aged children explained how, "the kids are receiving synchronous online instruction

and, at random times, I am pulled away from work to assist as teachers request special paper, pens, and other supplies for their instructional activities."

Productivity

As caregiving demands distracted academic mothers from sustained attention to work, the vast majority found themselves without time for scholarship. A tenure-track social scientist at a public R3 university with two elementary-aged children described how:

> I struggle to find time to write. My kids were homeschooling and staying on top of their work/helping them do work was time-consuming. I normally write on the fringes on time (before 7am and after 9pm) but with my days occupied I had to repurpose that time for grading, prepping, etc.

A tenure-track mother of an 11–14 year old reported that, "my child needs hours of assistance with school assignments. This means I have little to no time for research." Similarly, a tenured academic at an R1 with two young children (0–2, 3–6) described how her research had been on hold for seven months, "I have not done research since March 10, when our state went into lockdown and my children's daycare closed."

Ability to Signal Competency and Commitment

Academic mothers worried about how students and colleagues would perceive the quality of their work and devotion to the job. A community college adjunct described how, "I sometimes can't control the distractions at home, which I am concerned [will impact] the quality of my work." While other participants expressed concern about the actual quality of their work, a more pressing concern was how their work and commitment would ultimately be evaluated by others. An R1 professional-track academic in the natural and applied sciences, and mother of a 7–10 year old, commented that, "I think my seeming lack of ability to excel in teaching because of the excess of competing priorities in life will likely lead to my ratings not being as strong, and possibly damage my opportunities for promotion." Similarly, a new professional-track faculty mother shared, "I feel like my ability to teach this semester is limited by caring for a newborn/young infant with an additional class, and I'm concerned that may be reflected in course evaluations."

Additionally, academic mothers expressed concern about how work-life demands would affect colleagues' perceptions of their devotion to the job. A tenured social scientist at an R3 with two children worried that her split attention "might impact how I am viewed among my peers." They described a sense of isolation as academic parents and a lack of support from colleagues. According to a tenured mother with three children under 10 years old, "it has been an isolating ride. I am the only woman in my department and have been the only woman with young kids/mom for many years." A professional-track academic and mother of a 3–6 year old explained, "I wish I could be more open with my colleagues about homeschooling my daughter, but I fear they will perceive I am doing less work

(which thus far I am not)." A tenure-track professor at a private, 4-year university with two children described having this fear of being misunderstood or unfairly judged by colleagues come to fruition:

> In the summer I was working [from] 4am to noon....yes, 4 AM, in order to let my husband work [from] noon to 8pm (he's not in academia). When I told a coworker I couldn't meet because I really tried not to work past noon, she said "if only we could all be so lucky!" UUUUGGGHHHHHH.

Work-Life Experiences of Academic Fathers

Spotlight on Work

Like academic mothers, most academic fathers felt constrained by demands on their time, yet they expressed those demands mainly within the confines of work. Participants described decreased research productivity amid the pandemic and those on tenure-track expressed concerns about gaining tenure. However, academic fathers did not typically cite increased family responsibilities as the cause of their reduced productivity. Instead, they described increased work expectations in non-research areas. For example, an assistant professor in the humanities stated, "My teaching has been pushed online and thus subject to differing and confusing expectations. My research has basically stopped; even my book revisions have been put on hold because I simply do not have time." Similarly, an assistant professor in business observed that, "online classes also take more time to prepare which doesn't help progress research." A tenured professor commented that, "research is on hold for now. I am focused on teaching and service." Overall, academic fathers perceived that non-research work demands increased, making it "extremely difficult to find the time to do even the minimum of pre-covid work let alone more" within the work domain.

Despite having young children, three of the seven academic fathers did not mention their children or family responsibilities. Another participant described his child as "self-sufficient" and "very self-motivated, so we do not have to make sure his schoolwork is done." The remaining three participants did not represent the traditional, heterosexual, two-parent, male breadwinner family structure. Instead, they included a single father, a primary caregiver whose wife was the main breadwinner, and an LGBTQ dad with a same-sex partner. While these three academic fathers mentioned caregiving responsibilities, they did not describe a significant increase in these responsibilities amid the pandemic or resulting work-family conflict. Although one described the challenge of "feel[ing] like it's my responsibility to prod my children and students into action," there was nothing to suggest this was a particularly new or increased responsibility. For others, access to childcare meant little disruption to everyday routines, "we now have access to child care 5 days/week for [my 2 year old daughter]. If she were home with us 24/7 like some other families, it would be a very different semester." None of the seven respondents mentioned household responsibilities beyond caregiving.

Prioritizing One Role

The academic fathers in this study did not articulate a deep conflict stemming from dual role expectations but rather clearly described giving priority to one or the other. For one professional-track father, the pandemic offered an opportunity to focus on his professional role, "since entertainment options have decreased (no going out to crowded places), I find myself working more." Subsequently, he was able to take advantage of increased time to produce, "I've added goals and expectations; I'm piling it on, while everyone is struggling, I'm pushing harder to stand out amongst my peers." For the fathers who had taken on the role of primary caregiver pre-pandemic, that role remained their priority. As one participant described:

> I've always known that prioritizing family over career would limit my career, and heck I've also known that prioritizing individual students over research would also limit my career. The pandemic highlights these choices I've already made, if anything it gives me an advantage since others are forced into the situation that I chose for myself.

For the one academic father who described an intersection between work and family, he noted being held to different standards than his female colleagues:

> I really also see how male privilege operates in our culture around parenting. If I have my child on a Zoom call or have to be late, absent, etc., to parent her, I receive praise for being an active dad. I don't feel as worried about it as I believe most mothers do, and don't face the same kind of attitudes about my work-life balance.

Discussion

Although the pandemic radically shifted the work-life landscape, traditional ideal academic and mothering norms shaped academic mothers' perceptions of their ability to be "good" academics and mothers. As a result, they experienced significant bidirectional work-life conflict as they attempted to meet role expectations in their personal and professional domains. These findings are consistent with the broader workforce research on gendered work-life expectations and imbalances amid the pandemic in general (Thomas et al., 2020) and in higher education (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2021). We discuss our findings regarding the prevalence of ideal academic and mothering norms, the perpetuation of gendered work-life conflict patterns, and the persistence of ideal norms within university culture amid the pandemic.

Prevalence of Ideal Academic and Mothering Norms

Our study contributes to the existing research in several important ways. First, it finds that academic mothers' experiences of work-life conflict amid the pandemic

were both widespread and persistent over time. Similarly-defined experiences of work-life conflict spanned across all demographics in our sample. Adjuncts, instructors, tenure-track, and tenured mothers from 2-year, 4-year, private and public schools across various disciplines, races, and ethnicities described similar struggles. While much of the research before and during the pandemic indicates that work-life conflict is particularly high for academic women with very young children (Ahmad, 2017; Minello et al., 2021; Myers et al., 2020; Oleschuk, 2020), this study finds that work-life conflict was experienced broadly by academic mothers regardless of the age of their children. Remote schooling needs, coupled with the uncertainty created by the pandemic, meant that older children needed more time and support at home. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that work-life challenges for academic parents are not limited to the early years of a child's life, but change as children go through adolescence and require more emotional support (Hardy et al., 2018; O'Meara & Campbell, 2011). It also contributes to the research demonstrating a commonality of experience for academic mothers across disciplines and career stages (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2015), although we acknowledge the research highlighting the pandemic's disproportionate impact on women of color (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020), and contingent faculty (Flaherty, 2020).

Further, while initial research in the spring of 2020 indicated that academic women were shouldering the burden of increased work-life demands (Deryugina et al., 2021; Jung, 2020; Minello et al., 2021; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2021), our findings suggest the persistence of those heightened demands over time. Work-life conflict for academic mothers was not a temporary experience constrained to spring 2020, when unanticipated lockdowns and school closures changed home and work landscapes, but extended at least through the fall 2020 semester. In addition to our findings being consistent with larger-scale faculty survey data from fall 2020 (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020), they complement quantitative data by giving shape to the parameters of the conflict. Relative to ideal mothering norms, academic mothers felt themselves falling short of providing a nurturing presence and focusing on children's academic achievement, while simultaneously failing to meet the focus, productivity and signaling norms of the ideal academic.

Perpetuation of Gendered Work-Life Conflict Patterns

Although our data from academic fathers was limited, our findings suggest that gendered patterns of work-life conflict in academia were perpetuated amid the pandemic. Similar to academic mothers, fathers described increased demands on their time, in some cases preventing them from meeting perceived productivity expectations. Yet, the source of the time conflict was different. Academic fathers largely described intra-role conflict or conflict that occurs due to competing demands within a single domain (Kahn et al., 1964). Their perceived inability to meet ideal productivity norms was framed within increased teaching and service demands, rather than increased home responsibilities. In some cases, academic fathers found that, as the pandemic reduced extracurricular activities, they were able to commit more time

to work, signaling a strong devotion to the job and promoting themselves as ideal academics. While some academic fathers in our study prioritized their role as a parent, this was a pre-pandemic decision and an uncommon one within higher education despite an argued shift towards more "equal" parenting roles (Gould & Lovato, 2019). Rather than radically shifting perceived roles, our findings suggest that pre-existing gendered differences in work-life conflict (Colbeck & Drago, 2005; Fox et al., 2011; Wilton & Ross, 2017) were upheld amid the pandemic with academic mothers bearing a stronger work-life conflict burden (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2020).

Changing the Ideal Worker Mindset in Academia: Implications for Policy and Practice

During the pandemic, academic mothers felt unable to meet the ideal academic's singular focus, productivity, and signaling expectations due to role demands at home. Given our data, we do not know the extent to which academic mothers' concerns reflected their actual job performance or annual evaluations. Rather, our findings suggest that academic mothers judged themselves, and perceived colleagues judged them, based on ideal worker standards, implying that department and university cultures may have perpetuated the status quo in relation to ideal norms. As a result, academic mothers experienced significant work-life conflict regardless of their performance. To promote a more inclusive paradigm shift in the culture of academia, our study offers several implications for practice and policy.

Acknowledging the Burden of Dual Role Expectations

During the pandemic, acknowledgment of the changed work-life landscape within higher education has been limited, perpetuating ideal academic norms and caregiver bias, and underscoring, "how invisible the burden of motherhood is in academia" (Minello et al., 2021, p.10). Our study highlights the need for institutions to acknowledge the disproportionate consequences of the pandemic for academic mothers. This requires grappling with the prevalence of ideal academic norms, how they infiltrate and inform structures, policies, decisions, and interactions at all levels of the institution, and the perpetuation of gendered work-life conflict amid the pandemic.

Reconsidering Pandemic-era Supports

Given the experiences of academic mothers illuminated here, higher education institutions might consider whether the short-term, time-management policies that they have largely adopted during the pandemic, such as tenure clock extensions (Butler, 202; Deryugina et al., 2021), adequately meet the needs of their faculty, particularly mothers. Research suggests that stop the clock (STC) policies reduce women's tenure rates and increase men's (Antecol et al., 2018) as well as result in salary disparities between faculty who use the policy for family reasons relative to those

who do not stop their tenure clock (Manchester et al., 2013). While Antecol et al. (2018) find that reduced tenure rates for women who stop the clock are primarily a function of having fewer publications in top journals relative to men given the extra time, Manchester et al.'s (2013) results suggest that productivity differences do not account for the salary penalty. The authors argue that stopping the tenure clock for family reasons sends a negative signal to colleagues about a faculty member's devotion to the profession and ability to meet ideal academic norms; in turn, subjective factors influence salary decisions (Manchester et al., 2013). This is particularly notable given our finding that academic mothers felt unable to send the appropriate signals to their colleagues regarding work devotion. The use of STC policies then have a strong potential to 1) heighten academic mothers' perception of sending the wrong signal, 2) trigger actual caregiving bias that could be detrimental to academic mothers' tenure and promotion prospects, and 3) discourage academic mothers from participating in one of the few institutional supports that has been widely provided, further fostering a sense of ineptitude in meeting ideal norms and increased work-life conflict. Lastly, as Butler (2021) argues, STC policies only apply to a small swath of faculty. As our findings suggest, academic mothers across ranks attempted and struggled to reach ideal academic expectations. Yet, the primary support institutions used to support faculty amid the pandemic ignores the plight of non-tenure-track (Witt & Gearin, 2020) and tenured faculty.

Future research could examine higher education's responses beyond STC policies, including seemingly exemplary models such as the ADVANCE initiative at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, which included emergency funds for caregiving, modified tenure and promotion guidelines, and a retroactive promotion pay raise for those who delayed tenure (Mickey et al., 2020). An alternative approach would be for higher education to consider what other sectors have done to acknowledge and address pandemic-induced work-life conflict for caregivers, particularly mothers. Large technology companies, in particular, publicly recognized the intensified demands and focused on alleviating immediate work-life conflict for working parents through policies such as paid parental leave for caregiving (Wakabayashi & Frenkel, 2020). Others offered sabbaticals, nanny reimbursement and placement, and job sharing, among other supports (Corbett, 2020).

Shifting the Ideal

Our opening quotation suggests the impossibility of being both an ideal worker and a good mother in a traditional sense. Our study illuminates this ideological incompatibility and exposes the additional tension that academic mothers experienced navigating their professional and personal domains amid a global pandemic and the subsequent effect on work-life conflict. While our findings suggest that the pandemic's shockwaves did not widely disrupt ideal role expectations and long-standing gendered norms in higher education, there is still an opportunity for institutions to contend with these outdated norms and create more inclusive working environments that reflect today's worker (Williams, 2020). Advocates for institutional change argue that revising workplace ideals is a "moral imperative" (Weingarten et al.,

2021, p.14) and a requirement for reducing deep inequities in academia (Fulweiler et al., 2021).

While the burden of shifting societal norms regarding working and mothering cannot rest on workplaces alone, institutions of higher education arguably have a responsibility to recognize and address within reason the incompatible demands placed on academic mothers. While there is no quick or easy answer, we offer a place to start. Addressing this issue begins with acknowledging the male-oriented, traditional ideal worker norms that continue to shape the culture and policies of higher education institutions, recognizing the ongoing pandemic's contribution to gender inequality in higher education, and reconsidering pandemic-era policies. Beyond the immediate practices discussed here, the changed work-life landscape provides an opportunity for institutions of higher education to rethink entrenched policies, including but not limited to tenure and promotion processes, that promote an ideal academic culture (Willey, 2020). Doing so could serve as a catalyst for attitudinal change and encourage an overdue shift from the traditional ideal worker mindset towards equitable, inclusive, and manageable expectations for all faculty.

Limitations

Our analysis of academic fathers' experiences is constrained by the small sample (n=7) and should be considered preliminary. Yet, we believe the findings are valuable and should be included for several reasons. They offer one of the first insights into the experiences of academic fathers amid the pandemic beyond quantitative survey data. Despite the sample size, we feel it is important to give voice to this particular group of academic fathers who took the time to share their experiences. Although the data represents a small number of individuals, our findings are consistent with quantitative survey results suggesting male faculty experienced less work-life conflict than academic women amid the pandemic (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020).

As additional research examines academic fathers' experiences, our findings should be triangulated with those of future studies and evaluated comprehensively for evidence of greater generalizability (Hays and McKibben, 2021). Lastly, we suspect that the low participation rate of academic fathers in our study may reflect and reinforce our finding that caregiving demands and work-life conflict were simply not as intense for academic fathers and, therefore, was not an experience that they felt compelled to share. A final limitation of the study is that it does not explore the perspectives of academic caregivers who do not identify as gender binary. Future research could consider the ways in which gender non-binary parents in academia experience work-life conflict relative to traditionally gendered worker and caregiving norms.

Data Availability Not applicable.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This study was approved by the University's IRB (protocol #2066).

Consent to Participate All study participants were provided with the purpose of the research and consented to participate.

Consent to Publish The authors provide the *Innovative Higher Education* journal consent to publish.

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