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Mother–Father Parity in Work–Family Conflict

Mother–Father Parity in Work–Family Conflict? The Importance of Selection Effects and Nonresponse Bias*

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Do mothers experience worse work–family conflicts compared with fathers? Yes, according to trenchant and influential qualitative studies that illuminate mothers’ deeply felt problems from work demands that intrude into family life. No, suggest studies employing representative samples of employed parents that show mothers’ and fathers’ have similar work-to-family conflict. We assess these paradoxical depictions of parents’ lives using panel data from the national Canadian Work, Stress and Health study (2011–2019). We argue that comparable reports from men and women are misleading because they overlook mothers’ adjustment of work hours in the face of high conflict. As evidence, we reveal a gender suppression effect whereby mothers report higher conflict than fathers when adjusting for work hours in the baseline sample. Next, we show that mothers are more likely to leave paid work because of conflict. In fact, they are three times more likely than fathers to leave because of conflict’s focal predictor—having young children. These findings reflect mothers’ adjustment to the conflict they might already experience or anticipate. We use pooled person-year data and fixed-effects regression with logit specification to estimate the hazard of not working at the next wave by gender. We underscore the selection of some mothers into surveys or subsequent waves because it excludes those who systematically dropped out due to higher conflict and its primary predictor of having young children. We argue the observed “gender symmetry” of conflict is an artifact and illustrate the importance of theorizing stress processes over time to understand contradictory work–family conflict scholarship.

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Introduction

Are mothers more conflicted than fathers by work obligations that bleed into family life? Both classic and recent studies focusing on mothers suggest that, yes—that is the case. Fundamentally, employed mothers are conflicted and overloaded, given their predominant responsibility for the domestic domain and negotiating the “second shift” of unpaid work, despite their labor force participation. Given heavy demands in both spheres, their relationships, careers, and mental health often suffer, and some drop out of paid work entirely (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Stone 2007). Even executive women—highly successful and able to delegate many tasks to others—may experience contradictions between work devotion and the cultural schema compelling women toward home as wrenching (Blair-Loy 2003). Recent surveys underscore mothers’ continual contribution and extra burden of care, cooking, and cleaning (Ball and Daly 2012; Young et al. 2014; Moyser 2017) as well as persistent emotional fallout of guilt and stress when trying to negotiate paid work, housework, and childcare (Collins 2019; Orgad 2019). Mothers’ difficulties in balancing work and home receive not only academic attention but a great deal of interest in the popular press (e.g., Slaughter 2012; Khazan, 2021).

In contrast to the compelling stories of mothers struggling to *do it all*, recent national surveys in North America highlight that mothers and fathers report comparable levels of work–family conflict based on validated survey measures (Nomaguchi 2009; Aumann, Galinsky, and Matos 2011; Young and Schieman 2018; Young 2019). Findings from the *National Study of the Changing Workforce* illustrate that a higher percentage of US fathers reported some or a lot of conflict compared with mothers, with a notable 19-percentage point increase in fathers’ levels of conflict between 1977 and 2008 (Aumann et al. 2011). Canadian studies document similar trends: Between 1991 and 2001, men’s work–family conflict increased to the level of women’s (Duxbury and Higgins 2001, p. 37), though the sample was not restricted by marital or parental status. In the latter study, more men reported higher conflict in 2001 than 1991, compared with fewer women reporting such conflict between these two time points. A more recent study of Canadian dual-earner parents by Young et al. (2014) also found no gender differences in reports of conflict. Here, fathers reported a mean of 2.68 out of 5, compared with mothers’ 2.64. Shockley et al.’s (2017) recent meta-analysis of over 350 samples from survey-based studies on work–family conflict and gender underscore these patterns highlighting that “. . . men and women generally do not differ on their reports of (conflict)” (p. 1601).

The body of work–family conflict research thus provides a puzzle. On one hand, a bevy of qualitative work illuminates conflicts in mothers’ central and most salient adult roles. On the other hand, there is evidence of employed mothers reporting equal or even lesser work–family conflict compared with fathers in nationally representative samples. We assess this paradox with novel methods that analyze representative longitudinal data. We draw upon stress process and life course theoretical and analytic approaches to demonstrate how mothers are *responsive* to high(er) WFC and adjust work lives in ways that make

them—on the surface—appear comparable to fathers. We test our arguments by first examining whether mothers adjust their work–family lives by scaling back on paid work obligations (Young and Schieman 2018). Second, we examine whether mothers react to their experienced high work–family conflict by opting out of paid work because of either conflict itself or family-related obligations of young children at home that strongly predict their conflict levels. To test the latter, we use pooled person-year data and employ fixed effects regression to estimate predictors of conflict by gender, as well as a discrete-time survival analysis method with logit specification to estimate the hazard of not working in the labor force at the next wave of data collection.

Work–family conflict is a psychologically compromising stressor (Wheaton, Young, Montazer, et al. 2012). Our study suggests that mothers respond to, adjust to, and endure circumstances that make it appear as though their conflict experiences are comparable to fathers. Thus, we argue that gender similarity in national surveys of workers is apparent *because* mothers have adjusted to lower their conflict levels. Our study is among recent research emphasizing time and duration of conflict as a stressor (Wheaton et al. 2012; Allen et al. 2019). Moreover, we are among the first to test these arguments using individual-level panel data; the Canadian Work, Stress and Health study (2011–2019)—a national sample that includes individuals with a myriad of work and family conditions and experiences.¹

A Paradox in Work–Family Conflict Research

Gender has been a central focus in work–family conflicts scholarship for many years (e.g., Milkie and Peltola 1999; Williams 2000; Ridgeway 2001). Recent qualitative studies show how a lack of state and employer supports can harm mothers’ emotional lives (Collins 2019). State policies and standard workplaces set up for a breadwinner with a wife at home make employed mothers unable to fulfill a “double day,” resulting in their feeling guilt and distress (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Acker 1990; Collins 2019). Moreover, cultures of parental determinism—in which children’s well-being is thought to be centrally created through intensive devotion from mothers—may make time apart from children more fraught (Hays 1996; Faircloth 2014), though this varies by mothers’ social locations (Dow 2019). These structural and cultural barriers might influence mothers’ transition out of paid work and lower their chances of returning to paid work later (Orgad 2019; Stone and Lovejoy 2019).

Part of work-life imbalance for women also results from mothers’ continued unequal share of childcare, despite fathers doing more over the past two decades (Moyser and Burlock 2018; Pepin Sayer and Casper 2018). This is exacerbated by intensive parenting pressures. Parenting today is more demanding than in the mid-twentieth century (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020). This is reflected in a multitude of popular books and news articles showing how parents—especially employed mothers—are anxious and exhausted while attempting to meet the high standards of today’s parenting norms with little institutional support for

them to accomplish these goals (Sandberg and Scovell 2013; Schulte, 2014; Brooks, 2018; Miller, 2018; Westervelt, 2018).

Herein lies the paradox: Research shows significant trends of mothers doing more childcare even while increasing in labor force participation (*Women of the Labour Force 2015*) and notable patterns of employed mothers' compromised well-being in attempting to balance the two roles. But despite all this evidence, these women do not report being overly conflicted between work and family—at least compared with fathers. This unexpected gender parity pattern has been well documented in several prominent lines of work–family conflict research from representative surveys of workers in North America. Studies document similar levels of conflict among fathers and mothers—and some even show fathers with slightly higher levels (Aumann et al. 2011; Schieman and Young 2018). For example, Aumann et al. (2011) published a study entitled “The New Male Mystic.” Fathers reported similar levels of conflict compared with their female counterparts. The authors found that 60 percent of fathers reported “some” or “a lot” of work–family conflict, compared with only 47 percent of mothers (Aumann et al. 2011, p. 2).²

Common explanations for these converging gendered patterns in conflict may point to changing roles across work and family spheres, with an emphasis on fathers' heightened participation in the domestic sphere. This latter trend has been noted both in the United States and Canada (Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie 2006; Bianchi et al. 2010). Fathers' involvement in the home has increased through recent decades: using time diary data, Canadian fathers' participation in childcare tasks on the diary day rose from 33 percent in 1986 to 50 percent in 2015. Furthermore, fathers' time on childcare doubled from one to two hours per day during this period (Houle, Turcotte, and Wendt 2017).

We are therefore left with a paradox based in contradictory findings from incisive and influential qualitative evidence of mothers' conflicts in managing work demands while raising children *versus* clear gender parity in work–family conflicts from representative samples of North American employed parents. We unpack this puzzle, drawing upon the stress process model and life course frameworks, and consider whether mothers (a) adjust their work schedules in the face of current or anticipatory work–family conflict or (b) respond to heightened conflict experiences and key family contributors, like the presence of young children in the household, by opting out of paid labor altogether.

Stress-Process and Life Course Perspectives

The stress process perspective (Pearlin 1999) focuses on how strains in everyday roles—most fundamentally work and family—relate to well-being. Through an assessment of demands at work such as overload and a lack of control, as well as the conflictual intersection with the family domain such as parenting roles, the stress process has framed many studies of these key spheres of adult life (e.g., Carr 2002; Schieman et al. 2009; Schieman and Young 2011). Yet, George (2014, p. 251) and others (Milkie, Bierman and Schieman 2008; Aneshensel et al. 2013) argue that scholars have barely “scratched the surface” in understanding

temporal dimensions of stress processes and mental health. Given the rhythms of adult life, moving through careers, creating families, and changing demands in both spheres, a longitudinal approach to work–family conflict research is especially informative (Leupp 2017; Young and Schieman 2018). Although work–family conflict is often conceptualized, measured, and understood at one point in time, a rich set of studies documents how both work and family pathways are dynamic, based on oft-changing conditions (Martinengo, Jacob and Hill 2010). At work, job demands, co-workers, policies, supervisors, and the like change (Hammer et al. 2005). Moreover, a partner’s work and health matter for how much one’s own job intrudes upon family life and a healthy partner can manage more home demands and lacks deep needs themselves; whereas a struggling partner may exacerbate one’s one work–family conflicts (Hammer et al. 2005). This rich set of literature examining work–family dynamics over time points to the relevance of how men and women may differentially select into or out of work based on conflicts, thus pointing to the importance of accounting for gendered selections and adjustments people make.

Work–family conflict—as a stressor—likely changes in its salience and mental health impact over time (Wheaton et al. 2012; Yucel and Fan 2019). When new demands, such as work hours or job expectations become too high for the family’s well-being, mothers may adjust their situation to reduce behavioral, temporal, and cognitive conflicts to potentially improve health and well-being of themselves and family members (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Pearlin 1999). Documenting these adjustments among mothers versus fathers may help resolve the paradox of gendered work–family conflict levels.

Adjusting to Work–Family Conflict: Scaling Back on Work Hours

One plausible explanation of the paradox might be that mothers scale back on work hours to reduce conflict (Becker and Moen 1999; Nomaguchi 2011; Young and Schieman, 2018). By working fewer hours mothers may find more time to tend to childcare tasks and achieve greater balance across work and family spheres (Becker and Moen, 1999; Kaufman and Uhlenberg 2000; Blair-Loy, 2003; Bianchi and Raley, 2015). This is clear in several qualitative studies (Stone 2007; Orgad 2019), including classic work by Hochschild (1989) who highlighted the deep conflicts of employed mothers with young children in the 1980s. Other examples include Blair-Loy’s (2003) work on executives and Epstein and colleagues’ (1999) interviews with lawyers. In both instances, many women reduced the demands of their work to balance family life. More recent work also underscores why women work fewer hours in the paid labor force and why they reduce hours after having children, despite their continual tie to the labor force (Hobson and Fahlen 2009; Nomaguchi 2011; Williams et al. 2012; Kmec et al. 2014). These studies suggest that *were it not for mothers scaling back on work hours, women would likely report higher levels of work–family conflict compared with their male counterparts.*

The comparability between mothers’ and fathers’ conflict in survey data may therefore be attributed to the unaccounted adjustment that mothers have already

made to their work schedules to reduce what otherwise would be higher levels of reported conflict, compared with fathers. In other words, the gap between mothers and fathers would be greater, with women reporting higher levels, were it not for mothers' lower work hours. Quantitative evidence supporting this prediction is less demonstrative of this pattern, given that they statistically control for work hours and gender simultaneously when predicting work–family conflict, or test alternate conditional models by gender (Greenhaus et al. 2001; Schieman, Milkie, and Glavin 2009; Young 2019); focus on mothers only (Carlson et al. 2011; Nomaguchi 2019); or report averaged reports from descriptive analyses only (Aumann et al., 2011). Together, these ideas and results provide the basis for our hypothesis: mothers' reports of work–family should be higher *only* once work hours are taken into consideration. This implies that these women have already scaled back on job demands to accommodate current—or anticipated—work–family conflict.

Hypothesis 1: Mothers' work–family conflict would be higher than fathers were it not for their reduced work hours.

Responding to Work–Family Conflict: Opting Out of Paid Labor

Instead of adjusting their work hours to accommodate work–family balance, mothers with higher conflict may leave their job. A substantial literature supports this argument: To balance competing work and family demands, some mothers may opt out (or be pushed out) of the labor force altogether (Stone 2007; Boushey 2008; Orgad 2019). One study finds that having a child reduces the chances of subsequent employment by 13 percent (Boushey 2008). Yet, we underscore that only one-third of mothers leave the workforce after having children—either temporarily or permanently (Sweezy and Jones 2012). Nevertheless, mothers are far more likely to have job interruptions due to childrearing and are less likely to return from interruptions compared with fathers (Liu and Hynes 2012; Doren 2018).

These statistics imply that fewer mothers are opting out of paid work completely to attend to competing family obligations. Nevertheless, those who do leave the labor force either for short or longer term likely had experienced higher conflict than their counterparts who remain in paid work. Using a sample of married accountants, Greenhaus et al. (2001) find that work–family conflicts increased respondents' withdrawal intentions *and* actual withdrawal from their job over the following two years. While the authors did not study gender differences, other scholars' interpretations of their findings conclude that withdrawal due to work-to-family conflict would be higher among mothers than fathers. For example, Bianchi and Milkie (2010) claim that "... mothers who were most conflicted [between work and family] may have decided ... to exit the labor force when it was possible, which would prevent them from being part of the original sample of full-time employees included in this study" (Bianchi and Milkie 2010, p. 713). Thus, we hypothesize that mothers may withdraw from paid labor, given high levels of work–family conflict.

Hypothesis 2: Mothers are more likely than fathers to not be working at the subsequent wave of data based on previous work–family conflict.

Prominent Predictors of Conflict for Mothers: Young Children at Home

The presence of young children is often documented as the most salient predictor of work–family conflict (Michel et al. 2011; Nomaguchi and Fetto 2019). Moreover, mothers with young children experience conflict to a greater extent than their male counterparts for several reasons: From a time-based perspective, mothers still spend more time on childcare compared with fathers (Moyser 2017) and these time demands may directly increase conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). From an identity perspective, mothers are the presumed gatekeepers of the domestic domain (Williams 2000; Ridgeway 2001). Family obligations may be more salient to them, compared with fathers, and symbolically encompass more identity space—and this might make conflicting work demands more problematic.

From a socialization perspective, mothers may feel responsible for young children’s well-being and success (Hochschild 1989; Hays 1996; see Milkie and Warner 2014). Thus, competing work and family obligations likely result in more conflicts across spheres for mothers with young children compared with fathers (Martinengo, Jacob, and Hill 2010). These patterns and associated theories undermine arguments of parity in conflict levels by gender given that these mothers are more likely than fathers to withdraw from paid work—either by choice or constraint, given their childcare obligations. Although adolescents may also provide unique “pulls” for mothers, the comparison to fathers at this stage is less clear. These studies lead to the following predictions:

Hypothesis 3a: The presence of young children results in higher work–family conflict for mothers compared with fathers.

Hypothesis 3b: Mothers with young children are more likely than fathers—with the same aged children—to report not working at the subsequent wave of data.

Mothers and Nonresponse Bias in Reports of Work–Family Conflict

From a methodological perspective, these noted trends indicate that only a select group of mothers—those who remain in the paid labor force—is eligible to answer questions about work stressors in community-based surveys. Those with higher conflict who opt out of paid work are excluded from the sampling frame of surveys specifically focused on working life—or, if they are sampled initially, they might skip survey questions related to work–family conflict at subsequent waves if they stop working by any wave in longitudinal studies. This phenomenon of *nonresponse bias*, where certain segments of the sample are more or less likely than others to answer survey questions (Groves 2006), is crucial to interpreting the paradox in findings on gender differences.

In our case, the mothers selecting into the survey or remaining in paid work over the duration of the study period—and thus responding to conflict

questions—may reflect nonresponse bias, necessarily leading to lower average levels among the sampled women (Milkie and Peltola 1999; Schieman, Milkie, and Glavin 2009, for a similar discussion of selection effects). In the current study, we address these considerations and predict the likelihood of mothers leaving paid work at each wave of the CAN-WSH due to conflict and its focal predictor for mothers: having young children in the household.

Data and Method

Sample

To test the focal hypotheses, we use panel data from the *Canadian Work Stress and Health* (CAN-WSH) study, a national longitudinal study of workers. Five waves of interviews with the same respondents were conducted by telephone in 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019. To be eligible at the baseline interview, individuals had to be: (1) residing in Canada; (2) at least 18 years of age; (3) currently in a paid job or operating an income-producing business; (4) employed in the civilian labor force; and (5) living in a noninstitutional residence. In households with more than one eligible person, the “next birthday” method was used to randomly select a participant. Calls were made to a regionally stratified unclustered random probability sample generated by random-digit-dial methods. Interviews were conducted in English or French and averaged 30–35 minutes. A \$20 CAD gift card was offered to encourage participation. The final full baseline sample was 6,004, with a response rate of approximately 40 percent. Follow-up interviews with respondents yielded a sample of 4,403 in 2013, 3,685 in 2015; 3,378 in 2017; and 3,305 in 2019. We restrict our analyses to respondents with at least one child in the household under the age of 18 at any of the first four survey waves. We retain observations across waves for respondents who were working parents at Wave 1 under 56 years of age to target: (1) a subsample most likely to have young children at the start of the survey; and (2) respondents less likely to retire throughout the duration of our study. Respondents who dropped out of the labor force (by choice or constraint) at subsequent waves were still retained throughout the survey but did not answer questions on employment-related experiences—including work–family conflict reports. We discuss the inclusion of these participants in the Analytic Approach section below. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for our retained sample accounting for missing responses across focal variables using pairwise deletion by wave, respectively.^{3,4}

Measures

Dependent Variable

Not Working for Pay at Subsequent Wave. Respondents were asked at each subsequent wave whether they were working for pay. We created a dummy variable where respondents who were working at the previous wave but not at the current wave were coded as “not working for pay” (1) compared with continually working for pay (reference, 0).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Focal Study Variables for Respondents across Waves by Gender

Focal Dependent Variables	Wave 1				Wave 2				Wave 3			
	Mothers		Fathers		Mothers		Fathers		Mothers		Fathers	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Not emp. at next wave	.12	—	.07***	—	.12	—	.07***	—	.12	—	.06***	—
Work-to-family conflict	2.60	1.04	2.55	.98	2.59	.96	2.54	.92	2.60	.97	2.54	.90
Family conditions												
Child < 6 pres.	.23	—	.29***	—	.20	—	.30***	—	.18	—	.24***	—
Child 6 to 11 pres.	.29	—	.29	—	.23	—	.32***	—	.29	—	.31***	—
Child 12 to 17 pres.	.34	—	.26***	—	.32	—	.21***	—	.30	—	.28***	—
# kids < 18 in hhd.	.15	—	.16	—	.27	—	.17***	—	.28	—	.17***	—
Married	.49	—	.56***	—	.61	—	.75***	—	.63	—	.77***	—
Cohabiting	.18	—	.16	—	.16	—	.16	—	.16	—	.15	—
Meals	5.17	1.96	5.15	2.00	4.93	2.02	5.05	1.94	4.96	2.02	5.11	1.84
Work conditions												
Work hours	37.16	12.02	43.07***	10.83	39.52	12.76	44.33***	10.31	39.98	12.58	44.66***	9.44
Full control	.15	—	.20***	—	.14	—	.21***	—	.15	—	.22**	—
Not-for-profit/gov.	.57	—	.41***	—	.58	—	.42***	—	.58	—	.41	—
Self-employed	.13	—	.19***	—	.12	—	.18**	—	.12	—	.18**	—
Fixed location	.80	—	.65***	—	.82	—	.67***	—	.81	—	.65***	—
Covariates												
College degree or higher	.55	—	.51***	—	.62	—	.54**	—	.63	—	.54**	—
Age	39.31	9.19	39.98	9.35	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued

Focal Dependent Variables	Wave 4				Wave 5			
	Mothers Mean	SD	Fathers Mean	SD	Mothers Mean	SD	Fathers Mean	SD
Not emp. at next wave	.12	—	.06***	—	—	—	—	—
Work-to- family conflict	2.60	.98	2.51	.87	2.61	.96	2.50	.86
Family conditions								
Child < 6 pres.	.18	—	.23***	—	.12	—	.14	—
Child 6 to 11 pres.	.30	—	.35***	—	.25	—	.31***	—
Child 12 to 17 pres.	.32	—	.30	—	.30	—	.35	—
# kids < 18 in hhld at wave	.20	—	.12***	—	.33	—	.20***	—
Married	.59	—	.69***	—	.56	—	.69***	—
Cohabiting	.16	—	.16	—	.17	—	.16	—
Meals	4.78	2.07	4.84	2.01	4.76	2.04	4.77	2.13
Work conditions								
Work hours	40.48	12.18	44.07***	9.92	40.79	12.16	44.94***	10.64
Full control	.13	—	.20	—	.13	—	.22	—
Not-for- profit/gov.	.60	—	.45***	—	.59	—	.45***	—
Self-employed	.11	—	.19	—	.11	—	.19	—
Fixed location	.82	—	.67***	—	.81	—	.68***	—
Covariates								
College degree or higher	.65	—	.61*	—	.64	—	.65	—
Age	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Notes: Asterisks reflect significant gender differences, based on independent sample t-tests and chi-square tests for continuous and binary variables.

Work-to-Family Conflict. We use four items to measure conflict, adapted from the National Study of the Changing Workforce (Bond et al. 2003; Aumann et al. 2011). The items ask participants, “How often in the last three months..”: “have

you not had enough time for the important people in your life because of your job?"; "have you not had the energy to do things with the important people in your life because of your job?"; "has your work kept you from doing as good a job at home as you could?"; and "has your job kept you from concentrating on important things in your family life?" Response choices are "very often" (1), "often" (2), "sometimes" (3), "rarely" (4), and "never" (5). We reverse code and average items so that higher scores reflect more conflict (wave 1 $\alpha = .90$).

Focal Independent Variables

Gender. We compare mothers (1) to fathers (0).

Work hours. Respondents were asked at each wave to report the average number of hours they work per week at their primary job.

Presence of young children. At each wave, we measure whether there is a child residing in the household who is younger than six years of age (1). We compare these respondents to those who have at least one child aged six to eleven years of age (1) and who have older children in the household (12 to 17). We base these categories on the youngest child in the household. Our cross-sectional analyses of Wave 1 testing Hypothesis 1 use respondents with children aged 12 to 17 in the household as a reference category (since we include parents only in these results). For all longitudinal analyses, those without children under 18 in their household at a particular wave are used as the reference category for all longitudinal analyses. *Number of children in the household* is included in all models to account for multiple-aged children.

Additional Independent Variables

Married respondents (1) were compared with all other marital categories (reference, 0).

Family meals. We capture time spent with family by asking respondents how many days per week their family eats a main meal together. Responses vary from 0 to 7 days per week. We include family meals in our analyses to help approximate the time dedicated to family-related activities. Family meals indirectly captures the time, coordination, and emphasis that some respondents place on family time, compared with others (Musick and Bumpass 2012; Meier and Musick 2014).

Schedule control. At each wave respondents were asked one item about their *schedule control* at work: "Who usually decides when you start and finish work each day?" Responses included "Someone else", "you are able to decide within limits", and "you are entirely free to decide". We compare those in the latter category with "full control" (1) to all others (reference, 0).

Employment type and location. We also considered whether they are employed in a *not-for-profit or government organization* (1) compared with for-profit, (0); whether they are *self-employed* (1) compared with otherwise (0); and whether the respondent works at a *fixed location* (1) compared with otherwise (0).

Socioeconomic status. We approximated socioeconomic status using a measure of a college degree or more (1) compared with those with lower levels of education (0). Subsequent analyses tested our focal associations controlling for income, as well; the results were comparable (available upon request).

Age is coded in years.

Analytic Approach

We carry out our analyses in six stages. First, we use independent sample t-tests to test differences between average conflict levels for mothers and fathers at each wave. Second, we use ordinary least squares regression to estimate mothers' adjustment to experienced conflict by (1) regressing conflict on gender, and (2) adding work hours to the model (a primary work demand). We expect to observe a suppression effect given that mothers in our sample may have—*theoretically*—adjusted their work hours. We analytically test this based on mothers' fewer averaged hours worked per week. In line with Hypothesis 1, we argue that were it not for that adjustment of work hours, mothers would experience higher levels of conflict. Hence a significant gender effect on work–family conflict should be observed only when we include work hours in the model.

Third, we use pooled person-year data and employ a discrete-time survival analysis method with a logit specification to estimate the hazard of not working at the next wave of data collection. This approach presumes that each event occurs in continuous time between the discrete intervals of observations, and that the hazard rate for the event does not vary throughout these intervals (see Allison 1982). We use a logistic regression model to estimate the likelihood of “not working” (1) compared with “working” (0) at each subsequent wave (Tables A2). We use STATA 16 for all analyses and estimate clustered standard errors by individual since the data are longitudinal (Cameron and Miller 2015).

Based on the design of the data, each valid wave response for the participant represents a risk period, designated by t . This risk period covers four possible events (not working at wave 2, 3, 4, or 5), with the first risk period at Wave 2. Our model therefore estimates a series of $t-1$ predictors for a potential event at period t . All respondents included at wave 1 have at least one risk period: Those who either stopped working by the second interview or dropped out of the study after their second interview. All respondents have a maximum of four risk periods if they participated in all five waves—we code the risk periods based on participation in the study, rather than if the respondent is not working. In other words, those who stopped working, but then resumed work at a later wave are still included in the analyses. We also account for repeated events, so that each risk period observation has the opportunity of an event. That said, all our lagged variables are based on the prior wave responses, so if respondents did not have a valid value for work–family conflict at the prior wave (because they were not working and therefore the questions would not be applicable) they would be assigned a missing value and dropped from the analyses. We take this

approach to best determine the previous wave’s reports of work–family conflict in determining mothers’ *proximate* labor market participation, compared with fathers. Our analyses include a total of 4,930 observations in our final pooled models ($Mothers_{Obs} = 2,779$; $Fathers_{Obs} = 2,151$). Equation 1 presents the generic formula for analyses.

$$\begin{aligned} Notworking_{it} = & \alpha + \beta (TimeInvariantControls_i) + \delta (Conflict_{it-1}) \\ & + \delta (FamilyMeasures_{it-1}) + \gamma (WorkMeasures_{it-1}) \\ & + \zeta (Wave_{it}) + \varepsilon_{it} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

Both gender and age are measured at Wave 1 and are considered time-invariant control measures. Time-variant lagged measures in the $t-1$ period include work–family conflict, and family- and work-related measures: We include *lagged measures* ($t-1$) to best predict the hazard of not working at a certain wave (t). We estimate models both mothers and fathers (Table A2) and add survey wave in all analyses.

Fourth, we present the probability differences of not working at the subsequent wave for mothers and fathers given their previous conflict levels (Table 3). This is the most efficient way to interpret the maximum likelihood estimates with $t-1$ predictors for a binary dependent outcome (Allison 2009; Long and Mustillo 2017; Mize 2019). We use predicted probabilities and marginal effects from the underlying interaction models to correctly interpret the association between gender and conflict (Long and Mustillo 2018; Mize 2019). We calculate the difference between the predicted probabilities for mothers and fathers reporting not working at the subsequent wave for each conflict level. Group comparison tests of these differences are performed to examine whether the relationship between conflict and not working varies by gender (Hypothesis 2). We use a Wald chi-square test to estimate significant effects across predicted probability differences (Berry et al. 2010).

Fifth, we use pooled person-year data and model multivariate fixed effects regressions to estimate whether mothers compared with fathers are more likely to experience conflict because of having young children in the household (Table 4, Hypothesis 3a). We present results separately by gender, after estimating a significant multiplicative term between gender x the presence of young children in predicting conflict. We also find an unanticipated significant gender effect of the presence of children aged 12 to 17 predicting conflict. The gendered impact of having a child aged 6 to 11 was also included in analyses but was not found to be statistically significant compared with those who had no children under 18 at that wave.

Fixed-effects regression has the advantage of pooling observations within individuals to estimate within-person changes, thus accounting for unmeasured heterogeneity within individuals across time (Allison 2009). Unmeasured heterogeneity could be described as unmeasured consistencies that might influence reports of conflict at each wave. For example, respondents’ personality traits,

ideologies, dispositions, or attitudes—that remain constant across waves—can be captured analytically and potentially ruled out in fixed effects models, thereby maximizing the efficiency of estimates for time-variant measures. Hausman tests confirm unmeasured heterogeneity related to work–family conflict in our models, which is also a reason to adopt a fixed effects approach (see [Young and Wheaton 2021](#), for an overview). There are, however, limitations to fixed effects models. Given that all time-invariant measures are absorbed into the intercept in these models, we cannot assess the direct impact of key characteristics like gender or age, for example. We consider these limitations and provide evidence from the panel random-effects model predicting conflict as an outcome with gender interactions in Appendix 4. The results are comparable in their conclusion. We defer to the fixed-effects models based on results of the Hausman test of fit.

Finally, to test Hypothesis 3b, we present the probability differences of not working at the subsequent wave for parents who reported having young children in the household at the previous wave ([Table 5](#)). Like testing differences in conflict levels and labor market participation, we use post-estimation predicted probabilities and marginal effects from the underlying interaction models to correctly interpret the conditional association between gender and the presence of young children. Group comparison tests of these first differences are performed to examine whether the relationship between presence of child under six and not working varies by gender (the explicit test of Hypothesis 3b). We use a Wald chi-square test to estimate the significant effects by predicted first and second probabilities.

Results

[Table 1](#) presents descriptive results for respondents by gender and wave. We highlight significant differences across means or proportional values for mothers and fathers within waves using independent t- or chi-square tests, respectively. Note the absence of gender differences across average levels of conflict within each wave. This suggests mothers and fathers report comparable conflict, which mirrors previous survey studies that use similar questionnaire items to measure work–family conflict.

The first row of [Table 1](#) presents the proportion of participants not working at subsequent waves. At each successive survey wave, mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to report not working. See [Table 1](#) for additional gender differences in means and proportions by wave.

Mothers' Adjustment to Work–Family Conflict: Work Hours Suppress Gender Differences

[Table 2](#) presents the OLS results for baseline work–family conflict levels testing Hypothesis 1: *Mother's work–family conflict reports would be higher than fathers were it not for their reduced work hours*. Model 1 shows no significant gender difference in average levels of conflict. We only observe a significant gender difference when work hours per week are entered into the equation in

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Gender, Work Hours, Children by Age, and Additional Measures on Work–Family Conflict, Wave 1 ($N = 2,327$)

	Model 1 Gender		Model 2 Work Hours		Model 3 Family and Work Covariates		Model 4 Controls	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Mothers	.078	.05	.273***	.05	.253***	.05	.261***	.05
Work hours			.026***	.01	.026***	.01	.025***	.01
<i>Family and work conditions</i>								
Child < 6 pres. ^a	—	—	—	—	.076	.05	.073	.05
Child 6 to 11 pres. ^a	—	—	—	—	.052	.05	.057	.05
# Kids at home	—	—	—	—	-.085**	.03	-.078**	.03
Married (vs. cohab.)	—	—	—	—	.020	.05	-.007	.05
Meals	—	—	—	—	-.063***	.01	-.065***	.01
Full control	—	—	—	—	-.201***	.07	-.209***	.07
Not-for-profit/gov.	—	—	—	—	.061	.05	.001	.05
Self-employed	—	—	—	—	.003	.08	.091	.09
Fixed location	—	—	—	—	.091	.06	.075	.06
<i>Controls</i>								
College degree	—	—	—	—	—	—	.127*	.05
Post-graduate degree	—	—	—	—	—	—	.203**	.07
Age	—	—	—	—	—	—	.001	.01
Constant	2.607	.03	1.545	.08	1.720	.11	1.686	.15
R^2	.001		.088		.117		.123	

+ $p < 0.10$ * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed test). *Notes.* Unstandardized regression coefficients presented with standard errors. ^a Compared with parents with at least one child between 12 and 17 years of age only. We exclude respondents without children, since the primary prediction for Hypothesis 1 relates to gender differences in *mothers'* and *fathers'* work hour adjustments.

model 2—this pattern indicates that work hours suppress gender differences in conflict. When variations in work hours are introduced, the impact of gender on work–family conflict increases by 83 percent—from $b_{\text{mothers-mod1}} = 0.034$, $p > 0.051$ to $b_{\text{mothers-mod2}} = 0.216$, $p < 0.001$. These findings provide some evidence that mothers may adjust their work hours to reduce levels of conflict (support for Hypothesis 1). If this is the case, their responses to survey question about work-life conflicts at subsequent waves may be influenced by already

determined decisions to reduce time demands at work to help balance family obligations. The bias then contributes to an overall underestimation of conflict levels mothers would otherwise report, compared with fathers—leading to the observed “gender symmetry” of experiences as artifact.

The Likelihood of Working for Pay by Conflict

The prior set of results help provide context for the next analyses, which estimate the hazard of mothers not working for pay at the subsequent wave of the CAN-WSH based on their prior reports of conflict. In line with recent calls for more effective interpretations of logistic regression results (Long and Mustillo 2017; Mustillo et al. 2018; Mize 2019), we examine gender differences on the hazard of not working at the subsequent wave using average marginal effects (AME, see Table 3 for gender x conflict estimates). Full results from the estimated discrete time logistic regression models are provided in Table A2 for mothers and fathers.

Table 3 presents the AME of not working at the subsequent wave by conflict, and highlights that these estimates vary for mothers and fathers across almost all levels of conflict. The first set of differences, based on the AME suggest that mothers are more likely to report not working at the subsequent wave compared with fathers with similar levels of conflict, except for at the most extreme level (i.e., when work–family conflict equals 5). We underscore that these highlighted differences in probabilities based on the AME compare the results across gender groups (i.e., between-group differences) rather than documenting within-group differences—the latter of which is what we present in the first two columns of Table 3.

The patterns are presented visually in Figure 1 and offer support for Hypothesis 2: *Mothers are more likely than fathers to not be working at the subsequent wave of data based on previous reports of work–family conflict.* Note that the second differences—or what we can consider the within-group differences—are not statistically significant in these analyses (i.e., there is no difference in the effect of one level of conflict compared with another of not working at the subsequent wave by gender).

The Primary Predictors of Conflict for Mothers—The Presence of Young Children in the Household

Table 4 presents fixed-effects models from panel analyses predicting work–family conflict using the person period dataset with all five waves. These analyses test Hypothesis 3a: *The presence of young children results in higher work–family conflict for mothers compared with fathers.* Preliminary results showed a significant interaction term between gender (time-invariant measure) and presence of children under 6 in the household predicting conflict ($b_{\text{gender} \times \text{kidsun6pres}} = 0.096$, $p < 0.001$). These findings support Hypothesis 3a and suggest that mothers who report presence of young children at home (compared with having no children) across waves are more likely to report conflict at a subsequent wave relative to fathers in the sample. We present the fixed effects analyses by gender which

Table 3. First and Second Differences of Not Working in the Subsequent Wave by Conflict ($N_{obs} = 4,930$)

	<u>Mothers</u>		<u>Fathers</u>		<u>First Differences^a</u> <u>(AME's)</u>		<u>Second</u> <u>Differences^b</u>	
	<i>p</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	SE
<i>Work–family conflict</i>								
1	.056***	.008	.033***	.008	.023 ⁺	.012	—	—
2	.063***	.006	.037***	.006	.026*	.008	.003 (1 v 2)	.005
3	.072***	.006	.042***	.005	.030*	.008	.007 (1 v 3)	.012
4	.082***	.010	.047***	.009	.035*	.013	.012 (1 v 4)	.021
5	.092***	.017	.053***	.015	.039 ⁺	.023	.017 (1 vs 5)	.031

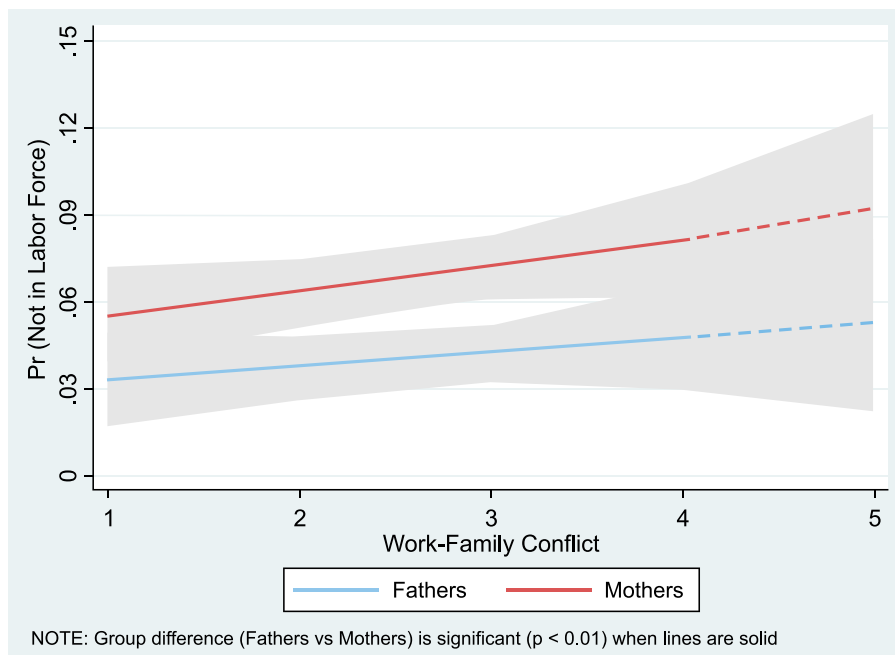
⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed). Statistical significance reported for marginal effects only. *Notes:* Predicted probabilities derived from pooled discrete-time logistic regression model with control measures (work and family conditions and control measures). Based on Model 7 of Table A2, we include all respondents who had a child at any of the first four waves. ^a First differences represent the marginal effects of conflict levels on not working in the subsequent wave for mothers compared with fathers. Higher values represent a greater probability of mothers not working compared with fathers at higher levels of conflict. ^b Second differences represent the probability difference between mothers and fathers reporting not working in the subsequent wave at higher levels of conflict compared with the gender differences in those probabilities between mothers and fathers when conflict = 1.

help clarify these differences: The averaged impact of having young children in the household on conflict for mothers is $b = 0.076$, $p < 0.001$. This effect is substantially less and nonsignificant for fathers ($b = -0.026$, $p > 0.10$). We also find a second statistically significant interaction between gender and children aged 12 to 18 ($b_{\text{gender} \times \text{kid } 12 \text{ to } 18} = 0.062$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that mothers who report the presence of a child in this age range across waves report greater work–family over time, compared with fathers. We discuss the implications of this in the discussion section.

The Likelihood of Working for Pay by the Presence of Young Children

Like our results predicting the hazard of mothers not working for pay at the subsequent wave based on their prior reports of conflict, we present here the impact of its predominant predictor: the presence of young children in the household—at least for mothers, as determined by the last set of analyses (presented in Table 4). Once again, we examine gender differences in the effects of having young children on the hazard of not working at the subsequent wave using post-estimated AME (Table 5). These analyses test Hypothesis 3b: *Mothers with young children are more likely than fathers—with the same aged children—to report not working at the subsequent wave of data.* We want to underscore that these differences in probabilities based on the marginal effects

Figure 1. Predicted Probability of Not Working at Subsequent Wave by Work–Family Conflict and Gender



compares the results *across* gender groups (i.e., between-group differences) rather than documenting within-group differences only. Again, the latter is what we present in the first two columns of [Table 5](#). We find evidence to support our predictions. That is, mothers with young children at home are more likely to report not working for pay at the subsequent wave compared with fathers ($p_{\text{mothers}} = 0.051$ versus $p_{\text{fathers}} = 0.018$). While this might seem like a minor difference statistically, these results indicate that mothers are about *three times* more likely to not be working compared with fathers when young children are in the household at the previous wave.

The AME for the last set of differences presented in [Table 5](#) are also notable (final column, second differences, $p = 0.033$). This result suggests that the variation between mothers and fathers with and without young children at home are significant. In other words, there is a greater difference between the hazard of not working for pay for mothers and fathers with young children than there is between mothers and fathers with older or no children at that wave (see [Figure 2](#), support for Hypothesis 3b; estimates from the full discrete events history model are presented in [Table A2](#).). These results support our predictions that the greatest predictor of conflict for mothers might also explain their chances of not being eligible for future survey questions on work–family conflict, thereby biasing averaged reports of such conflict by gender. Such biases may project an artifact of “gender symmetry” in nationally representative survey data.

Table 4. Fixed-Effects Panel Regression of Conflict on Age of Children by Gender (Mothers, $N_{obs} = 13,605$; Fathers = 10,044)

Predictors	Mothers		Fathers	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
<i>Family and work conditions</i>				
Child < 6 pres. ^{a b}	.076***	.02	-.026	.02
Child 6 to 11 pres. ^a	.043*	.02	.075***	.02
Child 12 to 17 pres. ^{a b}	.047*	.02	.020	.02
Number of kids	.009	.01	-.019*	.01
Married (vs. cohab.)	.031	.03	.009	.03
Meals	-.031***	.01	-.006*	.01
Work hours	.015***	.01	.013***	.01
Full control	-.068*	.03	-.074***	.02
Not-for-profit/gov.	-.065***	.01	-.032**	.01
Self-employed	.006	.02	.009	.01
Fixed location	.070***	.01	.007	.01
<i>Controls</i>				
College degree	.055 ⁺	.03	-.031	.03
Post-graduate degree	-.061	.05	.008	.04
Constant	2.041	.07	2.036	.06
<i>Fit statistics</i>				
$R^2_{overall}$.089		.079	

⁺ $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed test). *Notes.* Logistic regression coefficients presented. Robust standard errors clustered on the individual presented in parentheses. We include all respondents who had a child at any of the first four waves. ^a Compared with parents with no children at home at any given wave. ^b Significant interactions between gender and (a) children < 6 pres. = 0.096, $p < 0.001$; (b) children aged 12 to 17 = 0.062, $p < 0.05$. The interaction between gender and children aged 6 to 11 was also included but not statistically significant (-0.018 , $p > 0.10$).

Discussion and Conclusion

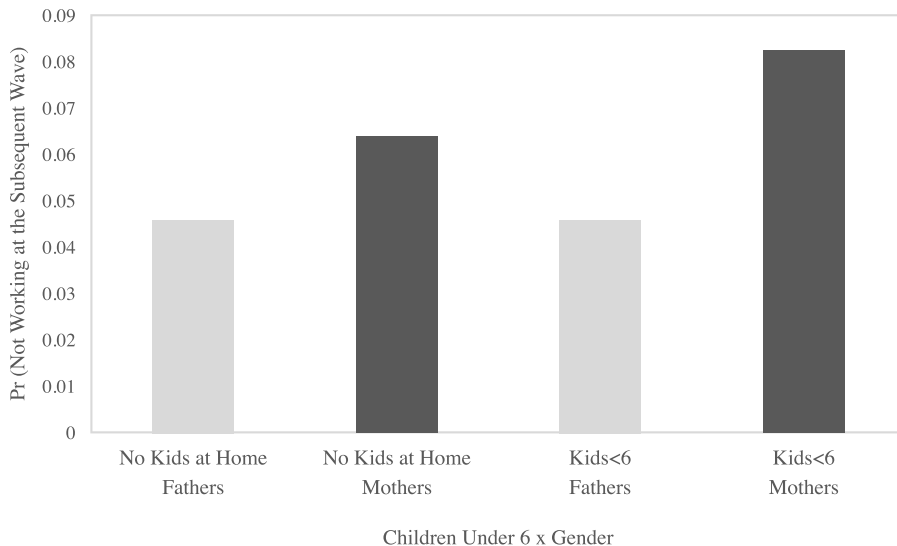
Easing parents' conflicts between their responsibilities in the workplace and the cherished loved ones in their families is vital. Stress process and life course perspectives illuminate how felt conflicts centering on employment's interference with the work, care, and relationships at home create difficulties in terms of mental health and relationship quality for parents (Carr 2002; Nomaguchi 2011; Young, Schieman and Milkie 2014). Experiencing conflicts creates anxiety, depression, anger, and other mental health difficulties, and is a vital topic of inquiry (Wheaton et al. 2012). Around the globe, the problem of work–family conflict has resonated even more deeply recently as a social justice issue, given

Table 5. First and Second Differences of Not Working in the Subsequent Wave by Children Under 6 ($N_{obs} = 4,930$)

	Mothers		Fathers		First Differences ^a (AME's)		Second Differences ^b	
	<i>p</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	SE	<i>p</i>	SE
No children	.064***	.006	.046***	.007	.018 ⁺	.009	—	—
Child under 6	.082***	.010	.031***	.006	.051***	.011	.033* (1 v 2)	.017

⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed). Statistical significance reported for marginal effects only. *Notes:* Predicted probabilities derived from pooled discrete-time logistic regression model with control measures (work and family conditions and control measures). Based on Model 8 of Table A2, we include all respondents who had a child at any of the first four waves. ^a First differences represent the marginal effects of having a child under 6 on not working in the subsequent wave for mothers compared with fathers. Higher values represent a greater probability of mothers not working compared with fathers when young children are present at the previous wave. ^b Second differences represent the probability difference between mothers and fathers with and without children under 6 *not* working at the subsequent wave.

Figure 2. Predicted Probability of Not Working at Subsequent Wave by Children Under 6 and Gender



the crisis of care for working parents during COVID-19 (Harth and Mitte 2020; Young 2020; Craig and Churchill 2021).

How mothers versus fathers experience and weather work–family conflicts should be a straightforward question. But two parallel streams of research show a paradox. On one hand, qualitative researchers demonstrate stark difficulties

working mothers face and feel in managing raising children (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Collins 2019). On the other hand, studies show similar levels of reported work–family conflict when we measure this stressor with valid and reliable survey items in samples of parents. To further underscore the paradox, fathers report *more* intrusions of work into their family life than mothers do in some studies (Nomaguchi 2009; Aumann et al. 2011).

We offer a path toward clarifying the complex findings in work–family conflict scholarship that parallels the divide between qualitative and quantitative research. In many exceptional qualitative studies, women report being torn by guilt and competing devotions in the intersection of the two key spheres of work and motherhood (Blair-Loy 2003; Collins 2019; Orgad 2019). These stories ring true in terms of expressing how mothers’ experiences differ from fathers’ in Western countries. And yet sampling procedures make it difficult to generalize from qualitative scholarship. Of course, the goal of such research is to richly report and theorize family processes, rather than generalize to the population at large. This trenchant and important social science stands somewhat at odds with studies using representative samples of parents, which show that mothers and fathers feel equally conflicted (Aumann et al; Nomaguchi 2009; Young et al. 2014).

Our study uncovers how methodological concerns can also undermine the best designed national studies when examining such a topic at a cross-section—or even longitudinally—without careful attention to gendered processes and potential nonresponse biases systematic in sampling procedures. We argue these processes produce the artifact of gender symmetry in mothers’ and fathers’ experienced conflict. Theoretically, our study shows the importance of analyzing the dynamics of work–family conflict, including anticipatory and responsive actions taken when it seems like work demands will become—or are already—too high.

The Artifact of Gender Symmetry in Work–Family Conflict: Mothers’ Adjusted Work Hours

Our study underscores the gender symmetry of work–family conflict as artifact. We document—like other nationally based surveys on these stressors—that mothers and fathers report no difference, on average, in work–family conflict experiences. However, we counter these conventional findings and argue that mothers likely adjust their work in the face of real or anticipated conflict. Scaling back on work demands is a primary solution women use to help find balance between work and family (Becker and Moen 1999; Young and Schieman 2018). This is the case even among women with prestigious occupations and high incomes (Epstein 1999; Blair-Loy 2003). We reveal a gender suppression effect whereby mothers report *higher* conflict than fathers, adjusted for work hours in the baseline sample. These results suggest that mothers make *adjustments* to their paid work demands by reducing work hours in an attempt to balance work and family, thereby avoiding conflicts. Thus, we argue that mothers’ responses to survey question about work–life conflicts at subsequent waves may be influenced by prior decisions about work demands that help reduce conflict.

The Artifact of Gender Symmetry in Work–Family Conflict: Mothers Who Are No Longer Working

Gender comparable levels of work–family conflict in survey data also reflect nonresponse and systematic bias of those who have been pushed out—or opted out—of paid labor because of work–family conflict. Even at a baseline, cross-sectional studies of employed parents—those who are selected based on this criterion—reflect selections of those who have left employment “voluntarily” due to workplaces that conflict heavily with family demands (Milkie and Peltola 1999; Stone 2007). Our study underscores that a bias might arise because these mothers’ experiences are systematically excluded from the averaged work–family conflict reports in survey data. Mothers sacrifice paid work to have the desired number of children (Liu and Hynes 2012) and even in the transition to motherhood—when employed women are pregnant for the first time—they anticipate conflicts and leave work (Doren 2018).

In our study, at almost all levels of work–family conflict, mothers are more likely than fathers to report not working at the subsequent wave. That means that—outside of the extreme—mothers who experience conflict between work and family are more likely to *not be working* at the subsequent wave compared with fathers experiencing that same level of conflict. In other words, work–family conflict disrupts career paths and tenure for mothers more than fathers. We cannot discern whether these mothers withdrew from the labor force voluntarily or not, but it signals a clear pattern of results to consider. The mothers who exit do not have an option of expressing their conflict levels in national quantitative studies, provided they have been systematically excluded from the survey process. Indeed, they have “solved” work–family conflict, but may be at risk of financial difficulties and career disruption, the former especially if they are in a marriage that ends. For fathers, they may be “stuck” at a level of work–family conflict that feels stressful but are less able or willing to reduce hours or to leave the labor force.

The Artifact of Gender Symmetry in Work–Family Conflict: Mothers with Young Children and Teens

The presence of young children is often documented as the most salient predictor of work–family conflict (Michel et al. 2011; Nomaguchi and Fetto 2019). Further, mothers with young children are more likely to experience work–family conflict (Martinengo, Jacob, and Hill 2010; see Shockley et al. 2017; Young 2018). We provide evidence that mothers with young children and mothers of adolescents are more likely than fathers with children of the same age to report work–family conflict.

The question of how mothers of adolescents may feel more conflicts from work to family than fathers is an excellent one for future research. Although our study provides just a glimmer of that possibility, it does align with some qualitative and theoretical work. With much of the intensification of motherhood related to preparing children for the next stage (Milkie and Warner 2014), mothers more than fathers may see teenagers’ needs for attention and

supervision, as well as guidance and perhaps feel more deeply the emotional pull of teens future departures from the household (Stone and Lovejoy 2004).

Our study has limitations. First, we do not have specific information on the birth of a child. The presence of a new child under 6 in the household includes any new births or adoptions. Second, we do not consider a variety of contextual family and work-related factors. In the Canadian context, parents have access to paid maternity and parental leave, but leaves as well as childcare supports are variable across the country (Mathieu, Doucet, and McKay 2020). A cross-national comparison controlling for contextual differences in gendered reports of work–family conflict (Collins et al. 2020) could advance scholarship. Comparison to the United States, one of the few countries in the world that does not provide guaranteed paid or unpaid maternity leave for all mothers, may be illuminating.

In sum, work–family conflict does not occur in a vacuum nor is it stagnant. Awareness and assessment of gendered work–family conflict necessarily involves examining cultural norms, which can pull mothers toward home by suggesting what they ought to do when conflicts arise (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Collins 2019). Deeply felt cultural pulls, even toward older children and away from work, may be quite difficult to counter, especially with “uncompromising” workplace structures (Blair-Loy 2003; Stone and Lovejoy 2004). For mothers, children represent “important others” in the same way as they do fathers, but work interferes in a deeper way because mothers are held accountable when they do not have the time or energy deemed as necessary for mothers to invest in children. Previous representative studies might disguise how mothers have adjusted and responded, leaving comparable levels of conflict across mothers and fathers because the number one antecedent of such conflict for mothers has been excluded from analyses (Greenhaus et al. 2001; Aumann et al. 2011; see Shockley et al. for an overview).

Scholars who study employed parents, even those who follow respondents over time but do not carefully analyze gendered anticipation of conflicts, are at risk of reporting equal levels of work–family conflict without contextualizing the findings. Assessing this stressor with only those currently in the labor force means mothers may be a more select group than fathers and interpretations should account for this. Fathers in fact may have similar or higher levels compared with mothers *because* they do not or cannot as easily respond by reducing hours or leaving the labor force. Mothers, on the other hand, are subtly or sometimes overtly pressured to respond to family demands in a way fathers are not. Theoretically, then, gender must always be at the center when assessing work–family issues. For the deeply felt stressor of work–family conflict, the questions of how it varies over time, and what studies are capturing (or not) at certain moments in the family life course, are paramount.

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Notes

1. We restrict our analyses to parents and focus on work-to-family conflict compared with family-to-work conflict, given that the former is more prominent among North American parents (Bellavia and Frone 2005; Michel et al. 2011) and potentially more amenable to policy shifts.
2. According to Ellen Galinsky, one of the lead authors on the study, the findings from the report were received with derision and skepticism (see Huffington Post <http://ideas.time.com/2011/10/28/what-about-the-men/>). These reactions reflected the widely held perception of fathers as a “privileged class [sic]”—one which should not be defined a disadvantaged group, especially when it comes to strains in the work–family interface.
3. Before excluding respondents missing on focal measures, we include the following number of mothers and fathers per wave: Wave 1: 1,429 mothers, 966 fathers; Wave 2: 917 mothers, 634 fathers; Wave 3: 675 mothers, 492 fathers; Wave 4: 522 mothers, 365 fathers; Wave 5: 410 mothers, 311 fathers.
4. We argue that our lower response rate may not result in biased estimates (Curtin et al., 2000; Babbie, 2015). We examined these possibilities with the original sample by comparing results from unweighted and weighted analyses in which we weighted the sample based on a key set of demographic statuses (e.g., gender, age, marital status, and education) from the 2006 Canadian Census. Few differences were found.

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