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Contrasting Conceptions of Work–Family Balance and the Implications for Satisfaction with Balance during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Pandemic-related changes, including the expansion of remote work and the closure of schools and daycare supports, posed unprecedented challenges to parents' conceptions of their work and home routines. Drawing on interviews with 88 heterosexual partnered parents, we examine the different ways parents understand what it means to balance work and family responsibilities and how their conceptions shaped satisfaction with their balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we discover that parents held three distinct conceptions of work–family balance at the outset of the pandemic: (1) individualistic (where balance is understood as an individual pursuit and regarded independently of their partner's efforts in the work and family spheres), (2) specialized (where each partner specializes in one sphere, producing balance between spheres), and (3) egalitarian (where partners share responsibilities in both spheres). Next, among the women and men who held specialized or egalitarian conceptions of balance, most sustained their level of satisfaction. In contrast, among those with individualistic conceptions, most women (but not men) reported a change in their satisfaction. These findings provide new insights about the varied meanings people attach to the concept of "work–family balance" and how these diverse conceptions have consequences for satisfaction with gender dynamics in households.

Keywords: work–family balance; work–family conflict; COVID-19; gender inequality

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1. Introduction

Parents' work and caregiving routines were among the most significant disruptions that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over a third of the U.S. labor force shifted to remote work (Dey et al. 2021) just as school and childcare facilities closed, creating a new work–family reality for many parents (Dunatchik et al. 2021; Yavorsky et al. 2021). Scholars have documented the many ways that parents responded to these changes as they endeavored to restore, improve, or maintain their work and caregiving routines as well as the consequences of these efforts for gendered patterns in the household (e.g., Calarco et al. 2020, 2021; Carlson et al. 2020a; Petts et al. 2021). Yet, the various ways people conceived of work–family balance at the outset of the pandemic and the ways these outlooks shaped their pandemic coping strategies remain unclear. To examine these processes, our study addresses two key questions: how do parents understand what it means to have work–family balance? And how satisfied are they with the strategies they deployed to achieve balance during the pandemic? We thus examine the diverse ways partnered mothers and fathers understand work–family balance and the extent to which satisfaction with their balance changed as the pandemic unfolded.

Although research across a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, management, and sociology, frequently relies on the concept of "work–family balance", the term has

remained vaguely and inconsistently defined. In addition to a lack of clarity and scholarly consensus, researchers know little about Americans' conceptions of work–family balance in their daily lives. Scholars typically assume that such balance is a property of the individual (Dumas et al. 2013; Frone 2003; Guillaume and Pochic 2009; Nippert-Eng 2008), but research examining how individuals and couples conceive of balance is scant. This oversight not only limits a clear understanding of how parents and workers imagine and achieve balance; it also overlooks the potential consequences of diverse views for the gender dynamics in heterosexual, two-parent households.

As the COVID-19 pandemic upended people's established work and caregiving routines, parents and workers faced a unique opportunity to reassess how they arranged work and family responsibilities, what form they believed the balance between the two should take, and what—if anything—they expected from their partners. Using 88 in-depth interviews with married or cohabiting parents from a larger pool of a nationally representative sample of adults with caregiving responsibilities, we found that parents articulated three distinct conceptions of work–family balance, which we label "individualistic", "specialized", and "egalitarian". An individualistic conception, which most resonates with popular understandings, defines balance as a state of being that one pursues individually and establishes independent of a partner's actions. On the other hand, many mothers and fathers conceived of work–family balance as a collective achievement. We found two versions of this couple-centric conception. In one, each partner specializes in one sphere, thus producing a balance between the spheres but not in the lives of individual mothers and fathers. In the other, balance consists of relatively equal contributions by both partners to both spheres.

Interviews also revealed that mothers but not fathers with individualistic conceptions of balance were more likely than others to experience a change in their ideas about how balance could and should be achieved, reporting either a decline or an improvement in their satisfaction with the balance in their lives. In contrast, those who conceived of balance in either specialized or egalitarian terms were less likely to experience a change in either their level of satisfaction or their conception of balance. Across all three groups, however, notable gender differences emerge—with women more likely than men to experience a change in their satisfaction with work–family balance.

These findings contribute to the literature on gender inequality and the work–family interface in several ways. By identifying and examining the diversity of conceptions among American parents—as distinct from scholarly conceptualizations of work–family balance—we clarify the various meanings people impart to an often used but rarely specified concept. We focus, then, on how ordinary people conceive of work–family balance in their daily lives, rather than how scholars and researchers conceptualize the term. Moreover, by showing how the pandemic prompted more scrutiny and revision of individualistic conceptions than of the other conceptions, we gain insight into how an individualistic definition has contributed to higher levels of work–family conflict for employed women. The relative lack of revision in men's conceptions—regardless of their partner's work status—also helps us understand why change in men's domestic participation has been more sluggish (England 2010).

1.1. Gender Inequality in Work and Family before and during the Pandemic

Scholars have identified how a myriad of cultural, organizational, and institutional factors contribute to gender inequalities in families' dual responsibilities for earning income and caring for children and the home. Hays (1996) highlights the norms of "intensive mothering", which prescribe that mothers should be constantly available and involved in their children's lives. Even away from their children, mothers engage in ongoing cognitive labor for their families (Daminger 2019). This time-intensive approach to mothering applies to mothers who work outside the home as well, requiring them to engage in a "second shift" of childcare and household labor after working (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Bianchi et al. 2012). Women prioritize time spent caring for their children (Bianchi and Milkie 2010; Pepin et al. 2018), even as mothers are increasingly responsible for their children financially (Glass et al. 2021). Yet, in the workplace, workers are expected to prioritize their

career responsibilities, conflicting with mothers' expected devotion to family (Blair-Loy 2003; Gerson 2010; Williams 2000, 2010). As a result, women scale back on their career ambitions or leave the workforce, especially when inflexible work environments are incompatible with their obligations in the home (Kelly and Moen 2020; Williams et al. 2012).

In response to gender inequality within the family, some couples seek to establish more egalitarian arrangements (Goldscheider et al. 2015; Gerson 2017; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015), especially when women express a desire or need (Carlson et al. 2020a). However, when an equitable division of labor is not achievable, men are more likely than women to revert to a traditional family arrangement (Gerson 2017; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015).

An extensive body of COVID-19-related research suggests that the pandemic generally deepened these pre-existing gender inequalities in the labor market and the home. The pandemic disproportionately affected female-dominated jobs (Alon et al. 2020; Fuller and Qian 2021). Women faced an increased risk of unemployment (Collins et al. 2020; Petts et al. 2021) and slower job recovery as the economy gradually reopened (Lofton et al. 2021). Mothers reduced work hours more often and in larger volumes than did fathers, even when both worked from home (Collins et al. 2020; Landivar et al. 2020) and especially when mothers were the sole providers of childcare (Petts et al. 2021; Zamarro and Prados 2021). At home, mothers shouldered the bulk of care work as schools and childcare facilities closed and distance learning models depended on parents at home for instruction and monitoring (Goudeau et al. 2021). Women also took on more housework (Dunatchik et al. 2021; Lyttelton et al. 2022) and childcare responsibilities (Calarco et al. 2021; Sevilla and Smith 2020), even in dual-income households where both parents worked at home (Zamarro and Prados 2021). And the loss of childcare supports and the demands of homeschooling demands are associated with the loss of employment for mothers but not fathers (Petts et al. 2021).

Research has also documented the consequences of these changes for parents' well-being. Academic research and popular media have both highlighted the high levels of stress experienced by employed mothers. Though fathers increased their time spent in childcare in the first few months of the pandemic (Carlson et al. 2020b; Shockley et al. 2020), they reduced their contributions as the pandemic continued. In October 2020, a greater percentage of mothers than fathers reported that balancing work and family became more difficult (Igielnik 2021). Highly educated women with children were especially likely to express distress as they tried to balance work and caregiving (Goldin 2022). All told, the impact of the pandemic on parents' work and family lives, the behavioral strategies they adopted to strike a balance between the two in the context of new, unprecedented circumstances, and how these patterns differed for mothers and fathers are well understood. Much less understood, however, is whether and how the pandemic shaped how parents think about what it means to balance work and family responsibilities or how one can or should do so. The major focus of our study is on this cognitive dimension of work and family life, including whether and how it shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In examining parents' conceptions of work–family balance, we consider the views of partnered parents of different genders who had varied arrangements for paid work and unpaid caregiving. In doing so, we enlarge the scope of study beyond employed mothers, the group to whom the issue of work–family balance is most often relegated. We thus identify and compare the different ways parents think about work–family balance and then examine how these diverse conceptions influenced their pandemic experiences. First, however, we survey prior academic conceptualizations of and approaches to understanding the concept of work–family balance.

1.2. Approaches to Understanding Work–Family Balance

The concept of "work–family balance", which originated in the fields of psychology and management, has centered on the individual as the unit of theorization and analysis. This perspective views individuals as embodying a set of social roles that give meaning and structure to their lives. The concept thus draws attention to the boundaries between an individual's commitments to paid work and unpaid family caregiving tasks (Frone 2003).

Studies using this conceptualization attend to the characteristics of boundaries, such as their permeability and flexibility, as predictors of imbalance and thus as sources of stress in individuals' lives (Frone 2003). This line of research also examines individuals' preferences for boundary management. Dumas and colleagues (Dumas et al. 2013) and Nippert-Eng (2008), for example, find that "integrators" prefer discussing family concerns at work and discussing work concerns at home, while "segmenters" prefer to silo and separate these life domains.

Building on this attention to individual work–family balance, scholars have sought to identify the extra-individual factors that influence a person's sense of balance and model the contextual antecedents of work–family conflict. One of the most widely studied factors is social support, defined as the "psychological or material resources provided through social relationships that can mitigate strains" (French et al. 2018). Michel and colleagues (Michel et al. 2011) show, for example, that spousal support—such as instrumental, emotional, informational advice, or feedback and appraisal—allows individuals to meet their demands in the family domain more effectively. Other contextual factors that shape the degree and type of personal work–family conflict include employers (Derks et al. 2015), organizational norms (Foucreault et al. 2018), work–family policies (Rothbard et al. 2005), and broader cultural norms around work (Mazmanian et al. 2013).

Gender, of course, provides a critical lens for understanding how and to what degree individuals experience work–family conflict. Sociologists have identified broad cultural schemas that view work and family as opposing devotions (Blair-Loy 2003) and gender norms that shape differences in experiences of work–family enrichment and conflict (Powell et al. 2009). Men and women both experience this conflict, but the "hegemonic narrative of work–family conflict" establishes this problem as solely a woman's problem (Padavic et al. 2020). This assumption has gendered consequences by diverting women from promotions and high-level positions of power when they use formally available but stigmatizing work–family policies, while inducing men to bear work–family conflict silently and reject accommodations for a problem that is not perceived as theirs (Padavic et al. 2020). Butts and colleagues (Butts et al. 2013) also find that gender moderates the relationship between social support and the experience of work–family conflict and job satisfaction. In Christine Williams's (Williams 2018) study of how workers in the oil and gas industry define work–family balance, she finds that work–family balance seems achievable to men, especially in households with a male-breadwinner model, but inaccessible to most women.

We seek to fill several gaps in these theorizations of work–family balance. First, frameworks that imply that work–family balance is relevant only for individuals with both paid work and caregiving responsibilities presume too narrow a scope. We find that even parents who are not employed in the formal labor force also deploy narratives of work–family balance.

Second, most research on work–family balance focuses on the work–family interface in terms of stressors, such as work–family conflict that arises when "role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect" (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985, p. 77). However, in line with previous researchers (e.g., Sirgy and Lee 2018; Crosby 1991), we argue for expanding the scope of focus to examine how parents conceive of both balance and imbalance in the ways that can either combine or separate paid work and family caregiving responsibilities.

Third, psychological models of social support, which point to a lack of spousal support as an antecedent to work–family conflict, underestimate the ways in which individuals' conceptions of balance can include partner support as a constitutive element of defining balance and how to achieve it. Indeed, some sociologists have been more explicit about the inherently social nature of work and family responsibilities, arguing that both are "role-related expectations that are socially negotiated and shared", particularly with one's partner (Grzywacz and Carlson 2007). Yet even such definitions of work–family balance assume that the individual—not the couple—is responsible for accomplishing balance by integrating work and family responsibilities. Our findings show, however, that some groups of parents conceive of work–family balance as a joint, rather than an individual, characteristic that applies to the household as a unit.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Sample

To understand how parents conceive of and evaluate their own work–family balance, we analyzed in-depth interviews with 88 adults who are married to or cohabiting with a partner of a different gender and who care for at least one child aged 18 or under. Study participants were recruited as part of a larger project, where a nationally representative sample of Americans with responsibilities for elder care or childcare were collected via the National Opinion Research Center's AmeriSpeak survey (NORC at the University of Chicago 2022). We contacted those who completed the survey and met this study's eligibility criteria for having childcare responsibilities. The overall response rate was approximately 25 percent. The interviews were conducted from June 2021 to February 2022, all via Zoom. During the data collection process, we also employed snowball sampling (Noy 2008), which generated a dozen additional interviews. Table 1 summarizes selected demographic and economic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Sample Descriptive Statistics.

	Women		Men		Total	
	n	Proportion of Women	n	Proportion of Men	N	Proportion of Total
Racial and ethnic identity						
White, not Latino/a/e	36	0.71	25	0.68	61	0.69
Latino/a/e	6	0.12	6	0.16	12	0.14
Black, not Latino/a/e	5	0.1	4	0.11	9	0.1
Other racial/ethnic identity	4	0.08	2	0.05	6	0.07
Age range						
20–29	3	0.06	1	0.03	4	0.05
30–39	30	0.59	12	0.32	42	0.48
40–49	14	0.27	22	0.59	36	0.41
50 or older	4	0.08	2	0.05	6	0.07
Marital status						
Married	43	0.84	36	0.97	79	0.9
Cohabiting	8	0.16	1	0.03	9	0.1
Number of children						
1	10	0.2	13	0.35	23	0.26
2	23	0.45	17	0.46	40	0.45
3	11	0.22	3	0.08	14	0.16
4 or more	7	0.14	4	0.11	11	0.13
Children's ages						
At least 1 child under age 6	30	0.59	19	0.51	49	0.56
At least 1 child between ages 6–12	14	0.27	12	0.32	26	0.29
All children over age 12	7	0.13	6	0.16	13	0.14
Household employment dynamics pre-pandemic						
Dual full-time (at least 35 h a week)	36	0.71	19	0.51	55	0.63
Female full-time/male part-time	1	0.02	1	0.03	2	0.03
Female part-time/male full-time	9	0.18	7	0.19	16	0.18
Female not in labor force/male full-time	5	0.10	10	0.27	15	0.17
Household income, annually						
Under USD 50,000	9	0.18	3	0.08	12	0.14
USD 50,000–74,999	13	0.25	6	0.16	19	0.22
USD 75,000–99,999	10	0.2	5	0.14	15	0.17
USD 100,000–149,999	8	0.16	14	0.38	22	0.25
USD 150,000 or more	11	0.22	8	0.22	19	0.22
Refused to disclose	0	0	1	0.03	1	0.01
Sample sizes	51		37		88	

We focused on partnered parents—married or cohabiting—for its theoretical advantages in illuminating how people think about and manage work and family responsibilities within the context of a two-parent household. Couples who live with dependent children are best positioned to cast light on the ways people conceive of, negotiate, and enact patterns of work–family balance, in contrast to elder care, which may be the responsibility of a range of kin and institutions outside the home. To understand how gender influences views on and decisions about paid and unpaid labor, we examined heterosexual partnered respondents (Killewald and García-Manglano 2016). We predicted that partnered parents' ability to draw on spousal support—and variation in their experiences of spousal support—would have implications for their conceptions of work–family balance. Our findings nevertheless reflect the views of individuals who are not in relationships with one another, which limits our ability to examine whether couples in the same household hold similar or different conceptions of work–family balance.

2.2. Data Analysis

Interviews ranged from 40 min to 2 h and 30 min, averaging about 90 min each. We asked a variety of questions about the respondents' responsibilities for earning income, taking care of their children, and completing household chores, as well as how those responsibilities were shared between partners before and during the pandemic. We followed up by asking how they felt about these responsibilities and arrangements, exploring if any changes in these arrangements occurred during the pandemic. We also addressed the best and worst aspects of the pandemic for the respondents' work and home lives as well as any lessons they learned through the experience. Through these answers, we were able to create a holistic understanding of interviewees' conceptions of work–family balance, their level of satisfaction with their balance, and whether their outlook changed as the pandemic proceeded.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded by the researchers and their colleagues. Interview transcripts were coded using Atlas.ti, a piece of software for qualitative data analysis. We conducted intensive analysis (Silverman 2015) on a set of twenty interviews (selected for variation in demographic characteristics) and relied on a flexible coding approach (Deterding and Waters 2021) in order to develop and refine category codes pertaining to relevant themes (e.g., structural arrangements of work and caregiving before, during, and after the pandemic for respondents and their partners, experiences of work–family conflict pre-pandemic and over the course of the pandemic for respondents and partners, respondent conceptualizations of work–family balance and changes therein pre-pandemic and at the time of interview, and respondents' reported satisfaction with their balance of work and caregiving responsibilities before the pandemic and at the time of interview). After coding the transcripts, we categorized respondents by their conceptions of work–family balance, then reread the categorized transcripts to discuss examples that illustrated different categorizations as well as examples that illustrated exceptions to these patterns. We then repeated this process recursively for the remaining transcripts, engaging especially with anomalous cases and revising our analytic categories based on additional evidence.

3. Results

3.1. Three Conceptions of Work–Family Balance

Interviewees reported holding a diverse range of beliefs about how they conceived of work–family balance at the outset of the pandemic. As Figure 1 shows, these conceptions about what it means to balance work and family can be grouped into three categories, which we label "individualistic" (which accounts for 45 percent of our total sample), "specialized" (25 percent) and "egalitarian" (30 percent). These views diverge according to whether balance is conceived as an individual or a couple-level attribute and, for those who conceive of balance at the couple level, whether it involves specializing in different spheres or coordinating participation in both spheres with the goal of equal sharing.

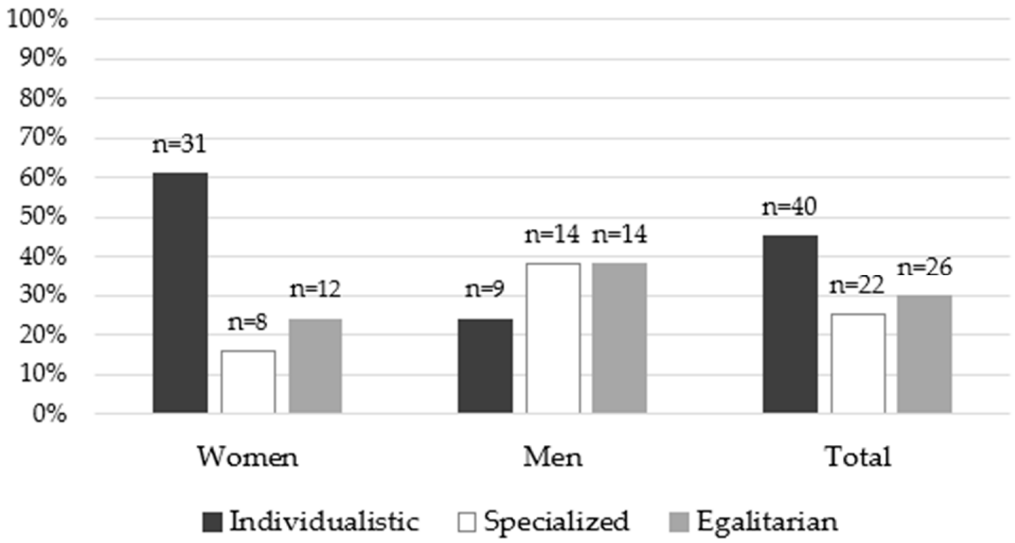

Figure 1. Three Conceptions of Work–family Balance, by Gender.

Figure 1 also shows how these conceptions are distributed across gender groups. Women are far more likely than men to conceive of balance as an individual attribute, with 61 percent of women expressing this view compared with 24 percent of men. In contrast, men are more likely to see balance as the result of specializing in separate spheres, with 38 percent of men adopting this view compared with only 16 percent of women. Among those who held an egalitarian conception of work–family balance at the outset of the pandemic, the gender gap is smaller—although more men (38 percent) than women (24 percent) conceive of balance in this way.

On one level, it is not surprising to find gender disparities in conceptions of work–family balance—especially the difference between women, who are more likely to see balance as an individual responsibility, and men, who are more likely to view it as a challenge for the couple to tackle. Yet prior research has shed little light on either the existence of such diverse views or its importance for how households approach and experience the intensifying modern conflicts between work and family life. As a result, we also know very little about how these contrasting conceptions of balance have influenced people's pandemic responses.

3.1.1. Individualistic Conception of Work–Family Balance

About sixty percent of women (31 of 51) and a quarter of men (9 of 37) viewed work–family balance as an individual attribute that was independent of their partner's distribution of breadwinning and caregiving responsibilities. This conception most closely resembles the original and still most prevalent use of the term, which arose as a way to identify and analyze the work–family conflicts that parents—especially mothers—increasingly faced as they joined the labor force, took full-time jobs, and pursued lifelong careers. For Belicia, a working mother with two preschool-aged children, achieving balance meant giving as much as she could both at work and at home:

> I think it is always hard to feel a balance, and when society is so different now where, sometimes people make it seem like, because you're a working mom, you're not giving it your all at home and your kids are missing out. So there's always that tugging at the heart. But I feel like a person like in my own aspect I feel like I can give 100% at work and 100% at home. And that's what I always strive for even when sometimes it can be a bit overwhelming, but I feel like my kids are growing and doing well with the balance that I have going, so I feel like it's working for us.

Individualistic perspectives, which women were overwhelmingly more likely than men to espouse, assumed that it is their "personal responsibility" (Collins 2019) to combine work and family and to do so with dedication to and efficiency in their commitments as both a worker and a parent (Blair-Loy 2003; Gerson 1985; Hays 1996).

In this group of thirty-one women, all were employed (twenty-four on a full-time basis and seven on a part-time basis) while also assuming primary responsibility for childcare and the bulk of housework. In fact, many of the women who worked part-time in this group had already switched from full-time work earlier in their career trajectories to make their workforce participation more compatible with accommodating their children's caregiving needs. The men in this group all held full-time jobs but had partners whose breadwinning and caregiving contributions were similar to the women respondents in this group. Accordingly, individualistic women's and men's daily routines diverged. Women's work and domestic routines tended to revolve around their children's schedules as they attempted to juggle both realms on their own. On the other hand, men were relatively free from these challenges since their partners shouldered the brunt of the responsibility for caregiving. As a result, these men viewed their own work–family balance as the balance between their time in and out of the workplace rather than in the family (Williams 2018).

Women and men both gave little thought to seeking balance as a couple. Instead, they viewed balance as an individual challenge that was not conditional on their partner's participation in breadwinning and caregiving. The uncoupling of their partner's contributions from their conception of how to achieve work–family balance unfolded differently for individualistic women and men. For individualistic women, their partners' contributions in caregiving were largely unreliable and thus were not factored into their own attainment of work–family balance. In contrast, for individualistic men, their partners' contributions in caregiving were taken for granted, which allowed them to pursue personal balance with less consideration for their partners' balance or lack thereof.

3.1.2. Specialized Conception of Work–Family Balance

About 16 percent of women (8 of 51), compared with close to 40 percent of men (14 of 37), conceived of work–family balance in specialized terms—that is, as a property of the couple rather than the individual and with each partner specializing in one sphere and relying on the other partner for the other. In such an arrangement, achieving work–family balance did not require each parent to be equally engaged in both spheres. To the contrary, accomplishing balance depended on each member of the couple making an equivalent but distinct contribution. For instance, when asked about the ideal arrangement of work and care for his family of three, Jimmy replied: "Me working full-time, her working part-time, as long as the bills are being paid and our son is being taken care of—which was the most important part— . . . by [my wife]."

Not surprisingly, most also presumed that traditional gender norms, based on the notion of "complementary roles", dictated who specializes in which sphere, such that the male primary breadwinner economic arrangement prevailed for all respondents in this group except one. Women with a specialized conception took primary responsibility of the domestic sphere and either worked part-time (3 of 8) or did not participate in the labor force (5 of 8). Men, in contrast, believed they were responsible for breadwinning, and that the domestic sphere should be a woman's specialty. One man with a specialized view lived in a gender-reversed household where he worked remotely at a part-time job and took primary responsibility for childcare and housework while his wife worked full-time outside the home. Overall, even considering this one reversed arrangement, these women and men stressed a couple-oriented perspective that conceived of balance as the outcome when each member of the couple focused on one of two separate spheres.

3.1.3. Egalitarian Conception of Work–Family Balan

Close to a quarter of women (12 of 51) and nearly 40 percent of men (14 of 37) reported conceiving of balance as the equal sharing of breadwinning and caretaking responsibilities. Like their specialized peers, this group also viewed balance as an attribute of the couple, but they emphasized the conscientious efforts they made to splitting domestic responsibilities—including childcare, household chores, and maintaining a mental list of these tasks—with their partners in addition to their shared commitments to paid work. While specific tasks might be regularly assigned to one partner, it was regarded that domestic work as a whole should be shared even if that meant adopting a "divide and conquer" outlook. For example, Tommy described the intentionality with which he and his partner coordinated their respective full-time work schedules so that each parent was separately responsible for their 6-year-old son's morning and evening routines:

> [T]he way we balanced the childcare—that's really what we're looking at here—we have always basically shifted our work schedules off of each other to split it. So that basically my morning I would get up and go straight to work while both of them were still asleep. I always worked early in, early out. . .. And then she would get up, get the kid up, even some breakfast and get him off to daycare while she went off to went off to her work downtown, and then I'd be done with work. I'd come home, pick him up and I take care of him in the evening and get him some dinner. And then she'd get home for a little bit of family time before bed for him.

Egalitarian parents emphasized flexible sharing to prioritize tasks and accomplish, either separately or jointly, "whatever needs to be done", while also relying on two incomes (Gerson 2010). Almost all in this group suggested that their conceptions aligned well with what they actually did in dividing paid and unpaid labor. Except for one man whose partner worked part-time, they were in dual full-time working households where domestic responsibilities were shared equally among partners. These women and men expected equal engagement in earning and in caregiving for both themselves and their partners, and they saw this as key to achieving work–family balance. Unlike those whose conceptions of balance were individualistic or specialized, the shape of these parents' daily lives generally resembled the shape of their partners' daily routines.

3.2. Change and Continuity in Satisfaction with Work–Family Balance over the Course of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic created disruptions in both the care infrastructure and the workplace, with schools and childcare centers closing and many businesses establishing and expanding work-from-home policies. Our interviews reveal that these society-wide disruptions of routines forced many families to reconfigure their arrangements for care and work, influencing parents' satisfaction with how they combined paid and unpaid work in their households and increasing the salience of what it means to have work–family balance. For less than 40 percent of the sample, these changes persisted only in the short-term while the pandemic was at its most acute. For many of these respondents, any disequilibrium in their work–family balance was perceived as pandemic-specific aberrations due to the unprecedented circumstances. Others felt that their approach to work–family balance did not change; instead, as the set of responsibilities they faced for work and family care grew, their original approach allowed them to maintain balance as they had before the pandemic. At the time of our interviews in the latter half of 2021 through the beginning of 2022, these parents reported that their satisfaction with their work–family balance had returned to their pre-pandemic status quo.

However, for most of our sample, we find that parents' pandemic experiences had an enduring influence on their satisfaction with their work–family balance, even after stay-at-home orders were lifted and schools reopened. Two trajectories that characterized the accounts of similar numbers of parents in our sample emerged after the height of the pandemic. In one, the pandemic exacerbated the tensions between work and caregiving

responsibilities and brought unresolved negative changes in parents' satisfaction with their work–family balance. Work–family balance thus remained an elusive goal for these parents. In another, the pandemic brought positive changes in parents' satisfaction by improving flexibility in the work sphere, thereby easing the reconciliation of the work and family spheres and constituting a new normal. We also find that increases in satisfaction and in dissatisfaction were distributed unequally across groups by work–family balance conception and by gender. Compared to parents with specialized and egalitarian conceptions, mothers with individualistic conceptions were more likely to report either an increase or a decrease in their satisfaction with their work–family balance amid the unfolding pandemic. Additionally, regardless of how they conceived of balance, mothers were much more likely than fathers to experience declining satisfaction with their balance of work and caregiving responsibilities. We discuss these gender differences for the three groups in turn.

3.2.1. Individualistic Conceptions: Changes in Women's (but Not Men's) Satisfaction

Among all three groups, respondents with individualistic conceptions showed the most dynamic changes in satisfaction with their balance of work and caregiving responsibilities as well as the largest differences between mothers and fathers. Figure 2 shows the distribution of respondents' reported change in satisfaction from just before the pandemic to one and a half to two years after its onset, by work–family balance conceptions and gender. Among women who viewed work–family balance as an individual attribute, 52 percent (16 mothers) reported that their dissatisfaction with their balance grew during the pandemic, while 29 percent (9 mothers) became more satisfied, leaving the remaining fifth of mothers reporting no change in their level of satisfaction. Among the smaller group of men in this group, however, almost everyone reported no change in their level of satisfaction, with the remaining two men reporting change in each direction.

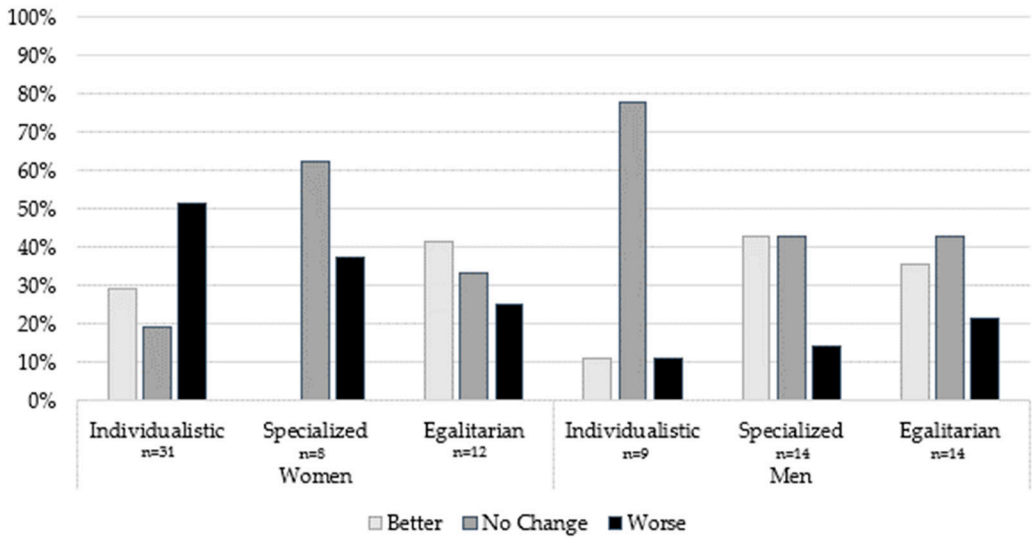

Figure 2. Change in Satisfaction with Work–Family Balance, by Gender and Conception of Balance.

Mothers who became dissatisfied had either undertaken a substantial and, to a degree, undesired change in their work situation in order to accommodate family needs or were still in the midst of navigating greater work–family conflict as they struggled to cope with the increased demands brought by the pandemic. When childcare facilities closed, for example, Diane, a mother of three young children, left her job as a dental assistant and began working as a babysitter for a neighboring family's two children so that she could watch her own children at the same time. She said: "I'm very lucky I'm able to stay home with my own kids. . . I don't trust other people with taking care of my kids. I'm very picky". Although her current work aligned with her values about watching her own children, it

was difficult to reconcile with the worth and self-esteem that she derived from excelling at the office job that she had enjoyed. In fact, despite being paid and working 32 h a week as a caregiver, she identified as a "stay-at-home mom". Even after daycare reopened, maintaining their new reality made more sense financially and logistically, although it came at some expense to their well-being:

> I mean, just staying home is just easier and works out better. . . I miss [working in the dental office] . . . It's hard because it's very rewarding. I like treating patients. I love just being very good at what I'm doing and being compensated for that. It's great work, and I love the people. It's hard for me because I'm very social, [and now] I'm a stay-at-home mom.

Unlike Diane, Victoria, a mother of two children aged 5 and 3, worked throughout the pandemic as a pharmacy technician. When her partner, who worked in construction, was laid off, she asked for more hours so that the family could make ends meet. Like Diane, Victoria expressed the desire to be the one to care for her children, but for her, there were also financial exigencies to contend with: "I wanted to spend time with my kids. . . I want to be here with my kids. . . You want to be there, but you can't because you have to come provide income for the household and stuff, so it was pretty hard". Victoria's dissatisfaction stemmed from the persisting tension between the time demands of her in-person job and the concurrent time that she yearned to "be there" for her children. A resolution was unlikely to be found in her partner, who continued to shirk household chores, or her employer, who requested more hours in the face of COVID-19's persisting disruptions to the labor supply, so the only change that seemed available for her to make was in her labor force participation: "I came to the point where I was really tired, I was ready to quit my job. I can't go to work anymore, I don't want to work. No more." Victoria ultimately reduced her work hours, even though that worsened financial prospects for their family. The pandemic exacerbated work–family conflicts for Diane, Victoria, and the other mothers who relied only on themselves to resolve competing demands and their satisfaction suffered as a result.

Among women for whom the pandemic improved satisfaction with their work–family balance, almost two-thirds (14) held individualistic perspectives. The pandemic's stay-at-home orders forced many employers to reconfigure the structure of work by expanding the prevalence of remote work and, consequently, the autonomy afforded to workers over when and how they met their job responsibilities. Although access to more flexible work was partial, these new realities showed mothers in privileged positions that previous experiences of conflict between work and caregiving demands were not inevitable. Rather than taking sole responsibility for managing the conflicting expectations at work and at home, mothers in our sample began to shift their expectations and demands about employers' roles in creating work conditions conducive to meeting family obligations. In addition, some of these women also began to move away from an individualistic approach to work–family balance and instead towards ones that made greater claims on their partner to increase responsibility for meeting obligations at home.

For Dora, a mother of a 12-year-old and a civil engineer working for a city agency, the pandemic prompted a change in what it meant to balance work and family. At the outset of the pandemic, Dora started working from home and continued to do so even after the option to go back to the office became available. The experience of working from home gave Dora greater satisfaction in her work–family balance, though she felt that she already had it prior to the pandemic. This prompted Dora to re-evaluate the pre-pandemic status quo at work, which had left her striving to achieve work–family balance primarily on her own. Now, she settled on a different view of balance, holding employers more responsible for recognizing and supporting the caregiving needs of workers since it was patently possible:

> Before [the pandemic], it was 'Well, yeah, you have work–life balance.' I was like, 'Well, I have vacation time or sick leave that I could use.' Because I didn't understand what work–life balance really was. To me, work–life balance was the fact that I was able to call my boss and say, 'Hey, I need to pick up my son because an emergency happened.' And they allowed me to, and that to me was work–life balance. And so now, the pandemic has taught me that it's different. I think it's making all of the things that you normally have to do in your life—making that something that's easy to navigate through and also providing the time or the compensation for it.

Renee, a college program director and mother of two preschool children, was similarly determined to find a new position that would allow her to work from home, at least part-time. When her employer refused to allow a remote option after a return to the office became possible, she quit her job. When new alternatives such as working from home became an option, it prompted a reassessment of her prior work–family reconciliation strategies as well as new ways of conceiving what balance meant and how it could be achieved:

> My family's coming first, and I don't think I'm going to let an employer in the future dictate that to me as much as I did . . . I think the pandemic helped me clarify personal boundaries of what I will and will not accept from an employer moving forward and the importance of my 'mom hat' and how important that is for my kids. . . In my exit interview, I said 'If you don't start being flexible and understanding of different situations, you're not going to be able to recruit talent, you're not going to keep your talent.'

These reassessments were not confined to the workplace. Even though the perspective that balance remained largely a mother's challenge was not necessarily upended, some women began to demand change from their partners, thus veering toward egalitarian conceptions. Miranda, an architect who had been working part-time in an arrangement she made to "be there" for her twin 12-year-old sons after school hours, is one of them. The pandemic-induced transition to remote work freed up her time from commuting and transporting her children to and from school, which not only allowed her to increase her work hours to full-time but also to spend more time with her children. Her husband, who also began to work remotely, spent more time with the family as well and shared household chores. The pandemic had allowed her to question the necessity of making career sacrifices to achieve work–family balance. At the time of the interview, she was preparing to start her own business with her husband as joint co-founders:

> I saw that I didn't have to make those sacrifices. . .I feel more empowered to say, 'This is what I need and not. It might not be how things used to be done, but I need to do it this way.' Instead of saying, 'Okay, that's how things are done, I'm just going to make the sacrifice for my own career because I can't fit into this structure.' I think I got more empowered to say that I can still do everything as long as I don't have to fit into this structure.

Whatever the direction of change, each of these trajectories of satisfaction with balance highlight how the effects of the pandemic were most likely to affect women who had adopted an individualistic approach of balancing work and family responsibilities as it had left them facing tradeoffs and making compromises that women who viewed balance at the couple level were less likely to confront. In contrast, most of the much smaller group of men with an individualistic conception did not report change in satisfaction with their balance of work and caregiving. From these fathers' perspectives, their partners (much like the women interviewees who expressed an individualistic perspective) made work adjustments to absorb the amplified caregiving needs brought on by the pandemic, requiring little change in how they structured their lives.

One example is Henry, a pilot for a private airline and a father of two children aged 11 and 9. Even though he espoused an individualistic perspective, he relied heavily on his wife, an accountant who also worked full-time but had conscientiously made a job switch prior to the pandemic to be able to work from home and address their family's childcare needs while she worked. Since he could continue to depend on his wife's work flexibility, he neither changed his outlook nor relatively high level of satisfaction with his work–family balance during the pandemic. As he explained:

> There's a lot of doctor visits [for the kids], and she doesn't even have to try to schedule around her work schedule for anything. She just puts it on the calendar and then schedules her work around the rest of her life … Being a pilot, my schedule's always jacked up, I have no schedule, because it's always changing. So her being able to drop everything at a moment's notice and take care of the kids helps me out a lot, because I don't have to worry about where I am.

3.2.2. Specialized Conceptions: Diverging Directions of Satisfaction by Gender

Among the 16 percent of women and 38 percent of men who adopted a couple-level approach that stressed accomplishing balance through specialization, about 63 percent of women (n = 5) and 43 percent of men (n = 6) said they maintained the level of satisfaction they felt prior to the pandemic. For the remaining three mothers and eight fathers, however, pandemic-related experiences shifted women's and men's level of satisfaction in disparate directions. Almost half of men who espoused specialized conceptions of work–family balance saw an improvement in their satisfaction with their balance during the pandemic whereas only one-fifth's satisfaction declined. In contrast, no women reported an improvement in their satisfaction and three mothers reported a decline.

Among the men who became more satisfied with their balance, nearly all had transitioned to working from home. Released from the need to commute and to maintain rigid work schedules at the office, these men were able to enjoy greater leisure and autonomy in how they organized their time. They remarked on the joys of spending more time with their children than they had in the past. Yet, these shifts rarely meant participating more in their partners' specialty by doing time-intensive domestic tasks such as cooking and feeding the children or cleaning their rooms. In line with their specialized conceptions of balance that deferred primary responsibility of care work to their partners, fathers' increased time with their children focused on playing with, transporting, and joining them in a shared activity.

For Matthew, a finance analyst and a father of two, work–family balance meant working at his job, sharing family meals in the evenings and on the weekends, enjoying leisure time, and occasionally attending his children's school events. He believed in what he called a "traditional, conservative lifestyle of arrangement" that depended on his wife, a part-time banker, to take care of the routine activities of childcare and household management. When the pandemic offered him the chance to work from home, it became easier for him to reconcile attendance at his children's school events with his work schedule:

> The pandemic allowed me to be more flexible in the sense of going to my kids' event at school during the middle of the day. I can flex my time … Attending that six o'clock [work] meeting is not as bad as it once was … The flexibility of virtual work, I've loved it.

As Matthew's case illustrates, remote work afforded more family time and greater work flexibility to men who viewed balance through the lens of specialization. As their partners continued to carry out the bulk of domestic responsibilities, these men were able to enjoy the perks of working from home without any obligation or inclination to take on an increased level of routine childcare and domestic work.

Jamie, in contrast, provides a revealing exception. While most men who entered the pandemic with a specialized view maintained this perspective, Jamie modified his

conception of his responsibility for household management. Although he continued to work on-site as a mechanic and the sole provider for his wife and 4-year-old son, the pandemic prompted Jamie to reassess his strictly specialized view of balance. Forced to spend more time at home due to COVID restrictions, he took stock of just how much childcare and housework his wife had been shouldering alone—an insight that spurred him to put "family over money" and switch to a new job that brought a pay cut but required fewer hours and offered a more predictable schedule. Consequently, he not only became more involved in the work of caring for his child and home, but also noted how such a change improved his own and his wife's well-being:

> I love my wife and I want the best for her. I don't want her to feel like a slave in her own home. But [before the pandemic] that's what I made her feel like . . . [Now] at 3:30, I can set my tools down and walk away. And that's what me and my wife discovered what we wanted . . . I'm home more these days. Monday's laundry. Tuesday's cleaning the cat litter. Wednesday, I take the trash out. I basically try to figure out what I can do for her . . . Making my family happy is what makes me happy as well.

Although Jamie remained the sole breadwinner and his wife remained the sole caregiver while he was at work, the responsibility for family tasks became more equally shared outside of work hours. In contrast, women who stressed specialization were more likely to experience ever mounting household and caregiving responsibilities as the formal infrastructure of childcare disappeared, remote schooling requiring their supervision became the norm, and time at home surged for everyone in the household. For these women, the pandemic compounded the fact that they had no respite from their workload at home. Not surprisingly, the intensification of physical, emotional, and cognitive labor tended to undermine these women's satisfaction with their specialized conception of balance.

Beatrice, a stay-at-home mother of two children, experienced this decline. Although her husband, a high school teacher and soccer coach, shifted to remote work, he sequestered himself in his basement office and began to work longer hours. In addition to the increased volume of housework, Beatrice found herself solely responsible for monitoring her four-year-old's virtual preschool activities while simultaneously taking care of her two-year-old. Although she did not expect her husband to share the increased load in an equal way, let alone voice her wishes, she became resentful of his failure to provide enough moral support:

> I think we have a really nice balance, so I'm comfortable with all that. The only thing I would say when I get really stressed is about the kids . . . I'll be like, you have to help me . . . What I need more from him is just like the mental, emotional drain that it puts on me . . . I don't need assistance with logistics. I need the emotional support . . . I definitely feel sometimes that elephants are on my shoulders, and I just want him to lighten the load just a little.

Another mother who was not in the workforce, Kate, struggled with the rising load of housework and childcare responsibilities when she became responsible for her oldest child's remote preschool instruction on top of her care for her two younger children. Her dissatisfaction grew when the pandemic extended her husband's months of absence as a soldier. Left "essentially single parenting", she not only expressed growing feelings of exhaustion and frustration, but also began to wish for a partner who could and would share the workload of raising three children and maintaining a home:

> I always wish that—not having to ask is the big thing. Like, if you see this thing that needs to be done, can you just do it? Because I don't want to have to be the delegator of all the labor and the house . . . It's not necessarily my job to dole out those assignments . . . It's always just kind of been the same, but having that extra stress [during the pandemic] just kind of amplified things that were already present.

Notably, the two men who recounted a similar decline in satisfaction were in a gender-reversed arrangement. Aaron, a father of a 6-year-old, worked short, irregular hours from home while his wife worked full-time as a high school teacher. As the pandemic continued, Aaron became increasingly dissatisfied as his wife struggled with overwork. While he did not expect her to help him with the increased childcare and household responsibilities, the decline in her satisfaction—brought on by the increase in her working time—undermined his satisfaction as well: "My wife was under an awful lot of stress . . . We used to never fight, but we've had several bickering matches . . . She is breaking mentally and we have to carve out time for our daughter. It's just wrong." Like Kate and Beatrice, however, Aaron felt powerless to act. From their perspective, the source of both work–family conflict and potential resolution seemed to depend on their partners, but no change was forthcoming, whether in the structure of their partner's work or in their partner's mindsets. In all three cases, the crisis in their balance remained unresolved, keeping their satisfaction low.

3.2.3. Egalitarian Conceptions: Continued Communication and Cooperation

The egalitarian model of work–family balance largely withstood the pandemic's challenges, with over 75 percent of women and 79 percent of men who espoused egalitarian perspectives remaining satisfied or becoming more satisfied. Joshua, a gardener and father of two, explained that he and his wife shared breadwinning and caregiving responsibilities "so nobody feels like they've got the disadvantage" and continued that approach throughout the pandemic. As a result, he was among the 43 percent of egalitarian men (6 of 14) and 33 percent of women (4 of 12) in our sample who maintained their relatively high levels of satisfaction with their balance throughout the pandemic. Monique, a clinical laboratory scientist and mother of an 8-year-old child, explained why she did not experience the need to reevaluate or alter her shared approach: "It's pretty much the same [as before the pandemic]. Basically, if it's not broke, don't fix it. And it works! Might as well keep it that way."

Ten egalitarian participants—equally divided between women and men—felt more satisfied during the pandemic, largely due to transition to remote work. As remote work afforded more flexibility to their routines and reduced the time spent commuting to work, egalitarian couples had more time to spend on their shared domestic tasks as well as leisure activities, which in turn improved both their personal sense of balance and the balance between the couple. Some, like Joe, became more efficient in their ability to complete breadwinning and caregiving tasks, and others, like Holly, came closer to achieving the couple-level balance that they intended pre-pandemic.

Joe, an IT specialist and father of one teenager, prioritized work–life balance before the pandemic and found himself better able to complete his care and work tasks when working remotely. In praise of remote work, he explained: "My concentration is better. I'm not interrupted constantly during my day, and [I love] the flexibility. I can take my daughter to practice, take her to school, pick her up, and then come back and continue to work until I meet my work obligation." Holly, a college admissions counselor and mother of two children under 5, rated her degree of satisfaction before the pandemic as a seven out of ten, and her satisfaction with work–family balance at the time of her interview was "higher, but I'm trying to figure out how much higher . . . It's like an eight, or nine. A little bit more." Working from home, which afforded greater freedom and smoother, more consistent coordination of childcare between Holly and her husband, accounted for the improvement. As she noted:

> He could be around more. If he wasn't arriving home till after seven, I was taking care of them from the time we got home around six to that time . . . Just with his ability to step away—even if he does go back to work after the kids go to bed—he's at least available to put them to bed or brush their teeth or whatever.

In contrast, six interviewees—also evenly distributed by gender—reported becoming less satisfied. This decline occurred when new work requirements encroached on the

time once available for domestic pursuits. These work surges made it more difficult for egalitarian-minded individuals to enact their conceptions of balance. Work surges that threatened to become permanent shifted their views on the significance of work in their lives. With their satisfaction depending on sharing work and family obligations and achieving personal balance, maintaining satisfaction then depended on their willingness to modify their job situation to better fit with their domestic commitments.

Brian, for example, found his work–family balance to be "completely satisfying" before the pandemic. As a high school teacher whose wife worked full-time in public health, he became dissatisfied over the course of the pandemic as both their workloads increased. To cope with this sense of overwork, he changed his outlook on work itself. He now believed that "it's just a job, versus it's my life. I think I cared a lot more about my job than I do now." By decreasing the significance of work in his life, he was able to maintain his conception of balance and strove to implement it in his life. At the same time, his collaborative approach to achieving balance had not changed: "When I had my thing at the beginning of the year, she really stepped up, and she was there for me. And then I tried to do that for her."

Courtney, an energy executive with a teenager at home, also became less satisfied over the course of the pandemic. When Courtney and her husband, a school administrator, both moved to remote work at the beginning of the pandemic, her workload increased. At a result, she looked to her husband to compensate at home for the loss of her available time, thus recalibrating balance at the couple level: "The work I did became more hours and became really critical, so I just dropped most of my household stuff at the beginning, which worked out fine because my husband's work was largely inactive, and so he would cook . . . He just took a lot of that on." However, Courtney's husband could only temporarily offer domestic support while she coped with more demands at work; he could not sustain that level of support indefinitely. Once her husband's work ramped back up in the fall, they both had to withdraw their focus on the domestic front. Their commitment to equal balance remained, but the enactment of that principle became equally dissatisfying: "In terms of housework, literally nothing is getting done. We're lucky if one of us cooks. We've increased our takeout . . . This house is forever a disaster. In terms of chores, nobody is doing them."

Because women and men with egalitarian conceptions at the outset believed that both partners should assume individual responsibility at work along with sharing responsibility at home and thus had already made shared efforts to respond to work–family conflicts, their couple-level arrangements more readily adapted to maintain shared participation even as the pandemic brought additional tasks and responsibilities. Parents who held egalitarian conceptions of work–family balance described purposeful—and often complex—efforts to adapt their work schedules and continue practicing their egalitarian practices throughout the pandemic. Relying on teamwork, these couples supported each other through temporary shifts in their individual work obligations, which helped them navigate unpredictable obstacles without relinquishing a longer-term commitment to sharing. Even those parents who faced challenges to securing paid work that would support their egalitarian preferences were willing to make adjustments that would allow them to pursue a shared approach to work–life balance.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Conceptions of what constitutes work–family balance remain a largely neglected topic in the analysis of the connections among work, family, and gender inequality. We analyzed 88 in-depth interviews with heterosexual partnered parents to identify the different ways that parents define what it means to balance work and family life and to ascertain whether pre-pandemic conceptions influenced their perceived satisfaction as conditions changed during the pandemic. We found that, contrary to sharing a unified view, our interviewees expressed three distinct conceptions of what constitutes work–family balance: (1) individualistic, where balance is conceived as an individual challenge and responsibility; (2) specialized, where balance is conceived as a couple-level challenge best

achieved when each partner concentrates on a different sphere; and (3) egalitarian, where balance is conceived as a couple-level challenge that is achieved when both partners share responsibility in both spheres.

Recognizing the varied ways that parents can define work–family balance extends both conventional and scholarly definitions of the concept. Incorporating this broader view, and especially the notion that work–family balance can be conceived as an attribute of a couple rather than an individual, provides an alternative framework not just for defining the concept but also for examining how conceptions of work–family balance both shape and emerge from couples' efforts to negotiate the rising conflicts between paid work and family life. In addition to recognizing that the search for work–family balance need not be a purely individual pursuit, it is also important to recognize that a couple-focused conceptualization can take different forms, with vastly different implications for the division of household labor (DeMaris and Longmore 1996; Gager 2008; Smith et al. 1998). Specialized views, which define balance as the result of each member of a couple focusing on a different sphere (Becker 1981), closely resemble the equity principle of fairness, according to which men's financial contributions offset women's unpaid contributions to caregiving and housework. An egalitarian conception, which defines balance as a collective enterprise that envisions each person contributing to both spheres, aligns with an equality principle of fairness in which both paid and unpaid work should be distributed equally between partners. This view grants equal importance to caregiving, regardless of such external factors as how much income a partner contributes.

A much higher proportion of women espoused an individualistic conception of work–family balance, which left them responsible for finding a way to integrate the two spheres regardless of their partner's contribution. Men, in contrast, were far more likely to espouse egalitarian or specialized conceptions, even when both partners held paid jobs. These gender differences did not simply reflect differences in paid work time or time availability. For instance, two-thirds of female respondents who were in dual-earner couples (24 of 36) espoused individualistic conceptions of work–family balance, whereas their male counterparts were much more likely to conceive of it in egalitarian terms (13 of 19).

The gender disparity in conceptions of balance points to the continuing force of cultural expectations that hold mothers primarily responsible for caregiving, even as women's labor force participation has gained parity with men's and almost half of mothers in opposite-sex marriages contribute 40 percent or more to their household earnings (Fry et al. 2023). This research suggests that persisting gender gaps in childcare time (Sayer 2016) may result in part from cognitive and cultural factors. Since employment and fathering remain "matching arenas", fathers are more likely to view earning an income as sufficient to fulfill their family responsibilities (Garey 1999). Fathers' conceptions of "balance" are thus more likely to reflect and reinforce arrangements that leave routine childcare tasks in a mother's domain regardless of her employment status. Even though fathers' time in childcare has increased over time, their participation is more likely to involve play activities and time spent in shared parenting (Sayer 2016).

On the other hand, employment and mothering remain "oppositional arenas" that continue to compel women to take primary responsibility for both, even when achieving "balance" in such oppositional arenas is an elusive goal at best. Indeed, many mothers described either transitioning to career paths with less room for growth or leaving the workforce altogether to accommodate their caregiving duties. Like prior work showing that the use of work–family reconciliation policies undermines women's promotion chances (Padavic et al. 2020), our research suggests that promoting work–family balance may not result in more domestic equality if most parents and workers continue to conceive of balance in either individualistic or specialized terms.

In addition to gendered conceptions of work–family balance, we also find gendered patterns in how the pandemic influenced parents' satisfaction with their balance. The majority of women who held an individualistic conception reported changes in their satisfaction over the course of the pandemic. Among those who experienced a decline in

satisfaction, individualistic mothers changed their work situation more often than women who held other conceptions as well as more often than men. While it is no surprise that the pandemic created the greatest work–family conflict among employed mothers, it is also noteworthy that the pandemic uncovered and, in some cases, intensified women's frustration with the stalled nature of the gender revolution.

In contrast, those who experienced an improvement in satisfaction began to reevaluate their prior conceptions of what it means to achieve work–family balance. Working from home allowed for the possibility of a more flexible integration of work and family responsibilities, and this experience helped to legitimate demands for their employers to accommodate workers' family needs. Men with individualistic conceptions largely took their partners' increased caregiving responsibilities for granted and thus reported little change in their outlooks or levels of satisfaction.

Compared to women with individualistic conceptions, the women and men with couple-level conceptions were less likely to describe a decline in their satisfaction over the course of the pandemic. For the majority of specialized and egalitarian parents, changes wrought by the pandemic were mostly reconcilable with their preferred couple-centered approaches.

Through interviews with a wide swath of American parents, this work extends existing research on work–family balance. Prior studies have found gendered discourses of work–family balance among respondents in the same organization (e.g., Williams 2018; Padavic et al. 2020) or in the same occupation (e.g., Beddoes and Pawley 2014). Our findings suggest that American parents construct the meaning of "work–family balance" in more diverse ways than previously understood. In addition to the egalitarian, specialized, and individualistic constructions, we find a further distinction between mothers and fathers with individualistic perspectives. This gender difference points to the ways that conceptions of work–family balance help perpetuate inequalities within households and contributes to a gender gap in parental satisfaction. These findings also expand the purview of "work–family balance" beyond employed men and women. Work–family balance is also relevant to those who do not hold a paid job but have partners whose options are constrained by their employment. Indeed, despite the focus on dual-earner couples, no breadwinning and caregiving arrangement is insulated from the intensifying conflicts between work and family responsibilities.

Acknowledging the various ways that contemporary parents conceive of work–family balance points to several avenues for future research. Since we draw on individuals' accounts of how they define balance and perceive how it is enacted in their households, knowing whether their partners' views converge or diverge from their accounts would provide important additional insights. As important, research should explore how people initially form their conceptions of work–family balance and how they either sustain or change their views in response to shifting social circumstances. We also need to know how these conceptions are related to gender ideologies, structural and cultural contexts, and significant life events.

Since our research is based on interviews with partnered heterosexual individuals with children, it is important to ascertain whether and to what degree they reflect the experiences of individuals in other groups. How do unpartnered parents and same-sex couples conceive of work–family balance? With the exception of joint custody arrangements, single parents are unable to espouse a couple-level conception of work–family balance, let alone enact it, but their conceptions may differ from the individualistic conceptions espoused by partnered women with a partner physically present and whose entire income contributes to household finances. Similarly, since same-sex couples cannot fall back on inherited assumptions about gender difference, their conceptions may also vary in unexpected ways. Adding the views of single mothers and fathers as well as same-sex couples to our findings for different-sex couples will provide fruitful insights about whether and how the presence or absence of gendered expectations shapes parents' conceptions of work–family balance, and how, in turn, these conceptions either reinforce or undermine gender inequality. All in

all, our analysis points to the importance of recognizing that the concept of "work–family balance" can have a range of meanings, with consequences that extend well beyond the individual to encompass the challenges facing diverse families and households.

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