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Exploring the Quality of "Quality Time": A Temporal View on Mothers' Experiences during COVID-19

Ortal Slobodin

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many parents, especially mothers, to juggle paid work and supervise home-schooled children for extended periods. While educators, mental health professionals, and the popular media often constructed this forced family time as a unique opportunity for "quality time," studies are increasingly recognizing its adverse effects on mothers' well-being. Integrating sociology of time theories with feminist criticism of the intensive mothering ideology, this chapter links idealized cultural representations of mother-child time to the dominant ideologies of "intensive mothering." According to these ideologies, mothers' time with children is irreplaceable and crucial for children's optimal development. Therefore, mothers should devote more and more time to their children's physical and mental needs. Based on content analysis of text data from parenting online advice columns, blogs written by mothers, and mothers' Facebook groups, this chapter examines whether and how notions of time and temporality create, maintain, and challenge intensive mothering ideologies during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, intensive mothering, quality time, time experiences

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 resulted in significant changes in the lives of many families around the globe. School closure and social distance have taken a particular toll on parents who have had to navigate between family and work demands [1, 2]. Previous studies showed that parents experienced increased anxiety, stress, depression, and burnout resulting from the pandemic. Moreover, parental psychological distress was associated with parental neglect and the use of harsh discipline practices [3]. The adverse effects of the pandemic were exacerbated for women, as they are the ones who typically negotiate the double burden of paid work while simultaneously providing care for children, the sick, and the elderly [4].

Although empirical studies have consistently linked increased time at home with heightened levels of parental stress and conflict [5, 6], cultural representations of this forced family time portraited it as the desired situation and an opportunity for "quality time" [7]. These representations are rooted in the dominant ideology of "intensive mothering" [8, 9] that encourages mothers to devote more and more time to their children's physical and mental well-being.

Integrating sociology of time theories with feminist criticism of the intensive mothering ideology, this chapter examines whether and how notions of time and temporality create, maintain, and challenge intensive mothering ideologies during the pandemic.

1.1 Mothering during a pandemic

Women are on the frontline of coronavirus. Women compose not only the majority of the planet's healthcare and social care workers but also 75% of all of the world's unpaid work at home [10]. Recent studies documenting the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on parents' labor force participation showed that working mothers were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19, especially if they were single mothers, had a low socioeconomic status, or were affiliated with racial or ethnic minority groups [11, 12]. According to the U.S. Census Bureau data [13], 3.5 million mothers living with school-age children left active work during March and April 2020, either shifting into paid or unpaid leave, losing their job, or exiting the labor market altogether. Almost a year later, in January 2021 still, 1.6 million fewer mothers were working than in January 2020. The vulnerability of working mothers to the adverse effects of the pandemic was associated with their increased representation in service and other jobs heavily impacted by pandemic closures and the heavier burden of unpaid domestic household chores that disrupted their ability to work for pay [13]. Even the promising flexibility of homeworking that allows people to work "anytime and anyplace" poses a further obstacle in mothers' careers due to their reduced access to time and space resources [14]. While a similar number of men and women are now working from home, homeworking is four times more likely to damage a woman's career [15].

Research focusing on maternal experiences during the COVID-19 is still scarce. However, previous studies proposed that the increased time at home was one of the major difficulties of mothers during the pandemic [5, 6]. For example, Whiley et al. [5] found that mothers who have greatly increased their time caring for their children disproportionately reported increased stress, anxiety, and frustrations with their children. The negative impact of increased parenting time on mothers' well-being was intensified when disruptions in childcare arrangements were coupled with intensive work or intensive parenting pressures. However, other mothers have experienced increased parenting time as a source of joy in otherwise difficult times [6].

Importantly, these findings suggest that mothers' experiences of the time at home were deeply rooted in the cultural ideals of "perfect" mothering [16]. Intensive mothering ideologies, which became the dominant mothering discourses in the west [8], describe a model of motherhood that asks women to always give fully of themselves, physically, emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually. Mothers are also expected to approach motherhood joyfully while sacrificing themselves to the demands of motherhood [17, 18].

Concepts of time are central to the intensive mothering ideologies that underscore the irreplaceable nature of mothers' time for children's optimal development [19, 20]. According to this view, the proper development of children requires mothers lavishing large amounts of time and energy on offspring. As a result, mothers who ascribe to intensive mothering ideologies are more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety, guilt, and shame for not spending enough time with their children [21, 22].

The social construction of mothers' time as irreplaceable and crucial to children's well-being is even more pronounced during stressful situations, such as the

current pandemic. Clearly, the COVID-19 outbreak has forced parents, particularly mothers, to spend much more time caring for their children [23, 24]. However, cultural representations of the intensive mothering ideologies portraited the pandemic as an opportunity for "family time", compensating for the chronic time deficits reported by working mothers. Therefore, examining mothers' time notions during the pandemic offers a unique perspective on how practices of intensive mothering are produced and maintained.

1.2 The current chapter

Previous studies showed that notions of time govern, inform, and interpret social meanings [25, 26]. These studies showed that socio-temporal dimensions create and maintain hierarchical relations and constitute discursive positioning of different social categories, such as single persons [27], immigrants [28, 29], and the elderly [30]. Building on the key role of time and temporality in mothers' lives [31], the objective of the current study was to consider mothers' experiences during the pandemic in socio-temporal terms. Specifically, the study examines whether and how do notions of time and temporality create and maintain intensive mothering ideologies during the pandemic and whether they may also challenge them.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative content-analysis-based approach to explore how socio-temporal norms are linked to intensive mothering ideologies. The methodology and choice of materials are guided by the view that new media technologies not only reflect but also constitute the discursive practice of motherhood today. Since I am specifically interested in the mechanisms through which social truths and meanings about motherhood are produced, the study is based on content analysis of online materials written for parents. As many studies suggested, parents in Western, high-resource sociocultural contexts are preoccupied with fear and confusion about the future of their children in a changing world [32]. In this climate, online advice columns, blogs, social media, and news items flourish [33]. During the pandemic, online spaces provided mothers a platform to engage with their maternal identity and share some of their difficulties. At the same time, these online spaces enabled the prosperity of ideal parenting images [5]. Therefore, online sources are considered key cultural sites for understanding some of the truths and discursive means through which the ideology of intensive motherhood is constituted, represented, and interpreted.

To locate time-related notions of mothers during the pandemic, parenting online advice columns published in popular media, blogs written by mothers, and mothers' Facebook groups were analyzed. The current research views all these sources as cultural artifacts affecting and maintaining current representations of the "good mother." The keywords "motherhood"/"parenthood" with "time," and COVID-19/ lockdown in English and Hebrew were used in the "google" search engine to locate relevant items. The data chosen for this analysis were selected from a large variety of texts published since the outbreak of the pandemic.

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, involving interpretative processes that were based on deconstructing data into thematic categories and relinking them into a holistic sequence of meanings to provide complex answers to the questions at scrutiny. The analysis process included several stages, as presented in **Figure 1** [34]. First, the entire content of each publication was read to obtain a
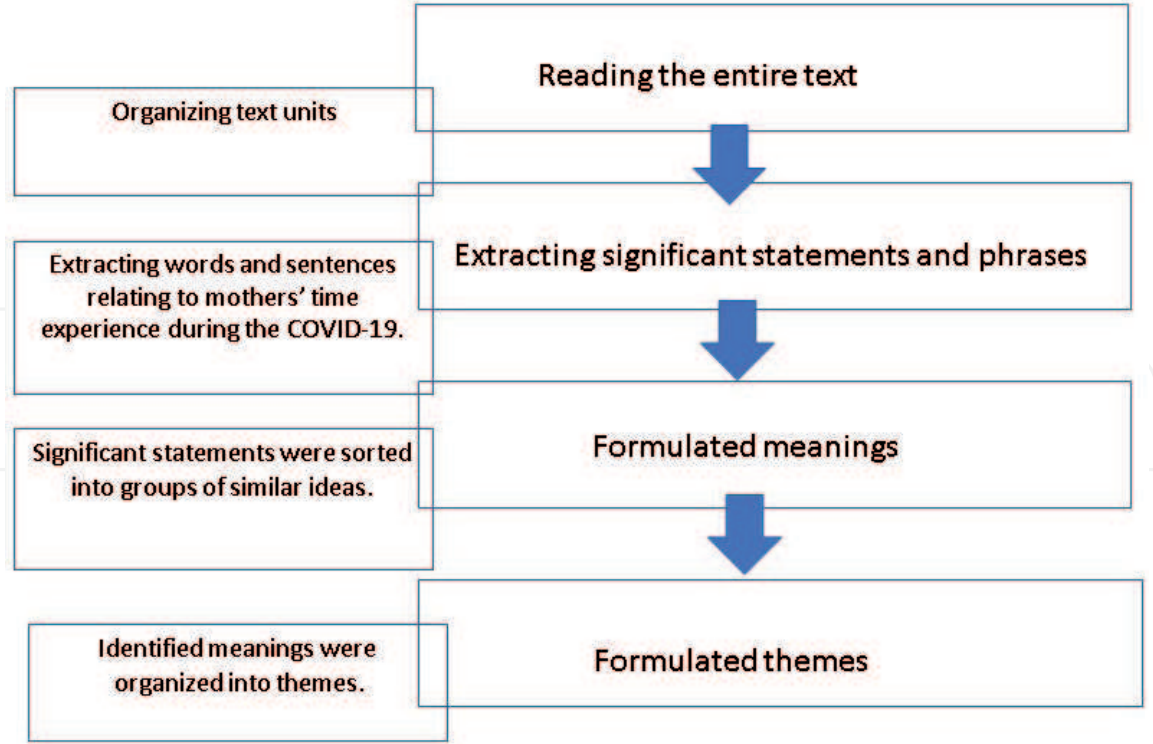
Figure 1.
Schematic summary of Colaizzi's [34] method for content data analysis.

general sense of the content as a whole. A text unit was defined as an article, advice, quote, and question and answer column. The unit of analysis was defined at the unit level, not the entire publication because we were interested in an in-depth analysis of the meaning of individual messages. In the second step, text units were read and reread to extract words and sentences relating to mothers' time experience, and segments of text were given the descriptive label of "significant statements and phrases." In the third step, highlighted significant statements were sorted into groups of similar ideas that were pasted together to begin to formulate meanings [34]. In the fourth step, the meanings from the significant statements and phrases were formulated and organized into themes. Finally, the meanings and themes that were formed in previous stages were integrated with theoretical concepts, to create an array of theoretical categories.

3. Finding and discussion

Data analysis revealed three independent, interrelated themes relating to mothers' time experiences during the COVID-19: idealization of the time spent at home, gendered perceptions of time, and alternative narratives of "quality time."

3.1 Idealization of the time spent at home

Popular media publications as well as professional educational and mental health parental guides pervasively focused on the benefits of the increased time at home as a precious opportunity for quality time [34, 35]. Consistent with the intensive mothering ideologies, time spent with children is idealized and romanticized [8]. For example, a guideline for parents published in the popular media in March 2020 encouraged parents to use their time at home to improve their parenting by investing more time and effort in their children [36]:

> *"Use this enforced situation as a possibility to spend quality time with your children...time that we usually don't have enough. You cannot leave the house, so this is the time to share your household with your children...make them feel valuable... play cards with your children, domino or memory games, look at your old albums, bake cookies, build a blanket tent, and after they go to sleep listen to a podcast that makes you think differently about your parenting, instead of your usual 'automatic pilot'. Because you can be a different parent, you just never had the chance to think about it."*

In a similar vein, a married mother to a 16-year-old son interviewed in the USA today [37] said:

> *"We've loved the time together, …. Before, life pulled us in 1 million different directions. But since the pandemic, we've been spending much more time together at meals, especially at breakfast and dinner."*

In line with ideologies of intensive mothering that underscore the importance of mothers' time for children's optimal development [8], the above examples present an idealized and romanticized picture of the time spent at home. Moreover, they encourage parents to dedicate their increased time at home, almost exclusively, to children's emotional and educational needs. Furthermore, these cultural representations imply that the current pandemic should be used by parents to compensate for their "pre-COVID-19" practices and beliefs that were not thoughtful enough.

A critical reading of such a perspective may uncover another important component of the intensive mothering ideologies, according to which mothers are blamed for not spending enough time with children due to other obligations, especially paid work [38]. A clear illustration of this mother blame can be found in the following text, published on the popular media in March 2020 [39].

> *"The social media is full of frustrated parents complaining about the COVID-19. It seems that everyone has something to complain about. Parents are complaining about the prolonged time they must spend with their children, the lack of assistance from grandparents, on the distance learning system. Parents even describe how spending so much time with their children makes them want to end their lives. On the other hand, prior to the pandemic, all we wanted was to spend a little more time with our children, to play games, talk to them or just be with them, and finally, when the opportunity arrives, we cannot see its bright sides."*

Like the previous text, this publication illustrates how notions of time and temporality are used to produce and maintain a sense of guilt among mothers who question the social expectation of the intensive mothering ideologies. This text, entitled "Why it is so difficult to stay at home with our children?" portraits parents as selfish and egocentric because of their refusal or difficulty in fully dedicating themselves to their children's needs. By doing so, these perspectives may not only contribute to child-centered parenting but also undermine a mother's well-being [40].

3.2 Gendered perceptions of time

Analyzing mothers' notions of time use during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that their time perceptions were highly patterned by gender [41]. Consistent with the traditional gendered role of being a primary caregiver, mothers found

themselves taking on more and more duties in the domestic sphere, including childcaring, home-schooling, cooking, and cleaning. Like others' findings on women who had to give up their work for staying with their children due to child-birth or immigration [22, 42, 43], the COVID-19 sharpened the distinction between women's and men's identities and tightens the ties that bind women to the home. Despite the accompanying stress and anxiety inherent to this re-domestication process, many women found themselves calmer and more peaceful [5]. For example, a post published in a Facebook group for mothers showed how mothers' choice of activities corresponded to the traditional construction of gender identities.

> *"Everyone who knows me knows that I am not a 'stay at home' person. I love being outdoors, meeting people, interacting. Suddenly, my biggest fear of not being a good mother or a good wife due to the endless time at home was replaced by a feeling that I was changed. First, my daughters now have a 'full time' mother, and I have a chance to know them better, be more relaxed and present. We have a deeper and a more secure attachment. My husband now has a wife that cooks every day, and he is very happy."*

Similar to previous findings on professional women who left their work for staying with their children [42, 43], such dedication to maternal roles was justified by the ideologies of intensive mothering. Inherent to these ideologies is the tenet that mothers are best suited to comprehend their children's needs and can interpret and respond to those needs intuitively [44, 45]. Consequently, mothering becomes a career in itself that needs a strong commitment for one to be "successful" [46].

Furthermore, I argue here that although increased time with children may be detrimental for mothers who hold themselves to the standards of intensive mothering [5], the opportunity to immerse in the domestic sphere completely may also provide some relief from the guilt, stress, and anxiety inherent to the struggle between work and family demands. As one mother, who lost her job a few months after the pandemic outbreak described in a Facebook group:

> *"I miss my job tremendously, but this is the first time in the 10 last years that I don't feel guilty towards my children and husband. This is the first time that I can enjoy being the mother I always wanted to be; totally available for my children, highly involved in their lives, knows everything about the difficulties. Even my house looks better, and we eat fresh food everyday."*

Qualitative and quantitative research has demonstrated that when women feel as though they have not lived up to the standards, they have internalized for being an ideal mother, they experience guilt and shame [47, 48]. This guilt, however, is exacerbated for mothers who hold a more traditional maternal role stereotype [49]. Therefore, the intensification of time with children during a pandemic provides mothers a unique opportunity to reduce the painful self-discrepancy between the ideal mother they want to be and the actual mother they are [40].

3.3 Alternative narratives of "quality time"

Our findings suggest that the increased time at home and the collapse of work-home boundaries opened up an alternative maternal narrative that challenges some of the taken-for-granted meanings of intensive mothering. These narratives use the notions of time and temporality to question the unrealistic and persecutory nature of the cultural, moral standards of "good" motherhood.

Two mothers, interviewed for an Israeli online advice column, targeted the assumptions that women can "have it all" and that family time during a pandemic could be dedicated to children's needs [50].

> *"Before lockdown, we had an organized timetable hanging on the refrigerator, so we could monitor the assignments and schedules of different family members. Now? We have just given everything up. Time is not relevant anymore."*

Another mother has recognized the impossibility of struggling between working from home and taking care of her small children:

> *"I am not apologizing for missing a job meeting or two because I fell asleep with my child at 2 PM. I am just too tired."*

An interesting perspective on how parents use notions of time to challenge social truths about parenting during the COVID-19 can be found in parents' use of humor. In their analysis of humor circulating on Israeli social networks during the COVID-19 lockdown, Lamish and Elias [33] revealed that humor played as an outlet for parents', especially mothers', anxieties and distress. In contrast to the idealized and romanticized perspective of mothers' time, mothers in their study took a cynical approach to their time at home in order to uncover the "real" quality of their family life during the pandemic. By targeting concepts of "leisure" and "quality time" [33], mothers struggled to resist the social construction of time at home as optimal for children's well-being. The following example, published by an artistic mother in August 2020, shows how parent-child "quality time" was ridiculed:

> *"Do you Remember the times when August arrived and you asked yourself: Ho no, what are going to do with the children the whole month of school vacation? Wow, that was a fantastic time."*

Other mothers used cynical descriptions of children's timetables, admitting that children were mainly busy with food and screen consumption [33]. As one mother posted on Facebook during December 2020:

> *"My children's C.V: 12 years of school. Of them, one year on Netflix."*

Realistic notions of time allowed mothers to re-consider the social construction of motherhood that expects women to be constantly available to nurture the success of their children while being constantly available as highly productive workers. As Whiley et al. [5] suggested, the impossibility of being the perfect mother and the perfect worker became more pronounced during the COVID-19 as the fragile boundaries between home and work collapsed, and mothers found themselves more and more immersed in the domestic sphere. Paradoxically, the additional burden on mothers' shoulders and the complex reality of raising children during a global crisis allowed mothers to challenge some of the social truths about mothering that appear natural and unquestionable, including why women still shoulder the parenting burden and what are the effects of this burden on women's mental health.

4. Limitations

This research serves as an exploratory step in understanding how notions of time inform, and interpret, but also challenges the social construction of being a

mother during a pandemic. As such, several limitations must be considered. First, analyzed data is limited to Western mothers from high-resource sociocultural contexts. Therefore, certain ideologies and practices observed here might not appeal to mothers from diverse sociocultural and economic backgrounds. Second, data selection and analysis were conducted solely by the author, thus limiting the reliability of the reported findings. Finally, the study did not consider time-related dynamics in mothers' experiences of the COVID-19. Future research should explore how intensive mothering ideologies are further modified during recurrent waves of the pandemic.

5. Conclusions

The above findings indicate that notions of time and temporality play a significant role in shaping mothers' experiences during the pandemic. Time-related notions of motherhood, including the idealization of childcare time, the devaluation of time dedicated to other obligations (especially paid work), and the gendered perceptions of time, produce and maintain culturally constructed prescriptions of intensive mothering [8, 9]. At the same time, mothers also struggled to present more realistic notions of time in order to challenge idealized representations of the mother-child relationship.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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