



Hybrid Lives: Work, Care, and Technology Among Britain's Hybrid Working Parents

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Abstract

The emergence of hybrid work, in which employees divide their time between the home and the office, has transformed the possibilities for organising paid work around care. This thesis examines how hybrid work is lived, organised, and made sense of by parents in the UK, and how its promise of flexibility intersects with existing gendered divisions of labour and responsibility. Drawing on 48 interviews and 15 digital diaries with parents working in the tech and knowledge-based sectors, I show that while hybrid work enables parents to combine work and caregiving in care-oriented ways that were previously difficult or impossible, this reorganisation creates intensified demands that are predominantly shouldered by mothers.

Hybrid work relies on a distinct and often gendered form of labour, which I term coordinative labour: the ongoing temporal and spatial work required to organise, align, and sustain paid work and care across domains. Among hybrid workers, this labour is mediated through digital platforms and devices that enable simultaneity, interruption, and constant availability. It is embedded in gendered norms of responsibility; coordinative labour is disproportionately undertaken by hybrid-working mothers and those positioned as primary caregivers. The responsibility for coordinating work and family across multiple members of a household contributes to heightened strain, often experienced as stress, guilt, and overwhelm, and a dense experience of time. Despite this, many report a strong preference for hybrid work.

Coordinative labour extends into the hybrid workplace, where gendered norms of visibility, constituted through digital technologies, shape how caregiving is recognised at work and continue to favour workers with fewer care coordination responsibilities. In a context of gendered parental leave and inadequate childcare provision, hybrid work is often not only a preference but a necessity for primary caregivers to manage the demands of paid work and care. This reliance, and the increasing pressure to return to the office, reveals hybrid work as a fragile and individualised response to structurally gendered care arrangements.

This thesis reframes flexibility as a form of work that must itself be organised. The key conceptual contribution of this thesis, coordinative labour, extends feminist sociological scholarship on cognitive labour, the mental load, and gendered organisations by foregrounding how digital technologies, gender norms, and the structural context intersect to shape the lived experience of hybrid work.

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Introduction



Figure 1. Photo of a home office work desk, with a monitor and laptop, scattered with notebooks, paper, children's toys, and a coffee mug. Shared via digital diary.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a rapid and far-reaching reorganisation of paid work in the UK, accelerating the uptake of remote, and then hybrid work, on an unprecedented scale. Workers who had once been tied to offices, daily commutes, and rigid schedules found themselves working from kitchen tables and spare bedrooms during Government-imposed lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. What began as an emergency response to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus has since evolved into a profound transformation in how office work is organised and experienced. Hybrid work, a flexible working model where workers spend part of their time working onsite and part of their time working remotely, emerged as a mainstream feature of UK employment, reshaping everyday routines, workplace expectations, and the organisation of work and family life.

Flexible work has long been promoted by academics and activists as a partial solution to the longstanding tensions between paid work and caregiving that disadvantage mothers in the labour market. Prior to the pandemic, flexible work was often stigmatised, inaccessible, or limited to a privileged few. The widespread normalisation of hybrid work therefore represents an opportunity: as flexibility becomes embedded in organisational practice and expectation, it expands the possibilities for mothers and other caregivers to sustain full-time

employment, participate more fully in professional life, and exercise greater autonomy in the temporal structure and spatial organisation of their days.

Yet beneath the post-pandemic normalisation of hybrid work, it remains an uneven practice. It arose not into a neutral landscape, but into a society already structured by gendered expectations around paid work and caregiving. While the flexibility of the hybrid model promises autonomy and improved work-life balance, it also risks re-embedding and reconfiguring longstanding gendered inequalities in new forms. In this context, parents – mothers, in particular – are hybrid work’s beneficiaries, and the ones who bear its uneven demands. Throughout this thesis, I find that mothers and those positioned as primary caregivers gain new ways to flexibly combine paid work with their caregiving responsibilities that were previously difficult, impossible, or stigmatised, while simultaneously taking on intensified domestic and caregiving coordinative burdens that arise out of the specific arrangements of hybrid work. These burdens amplify their experience of the mental load when compared with their hybrid working male counterparts.

Despite an expanding body of research on remote and hybrid work during and since the pandemic, we know far less about *how* these arrangements are lived, organised, and made sense of in practice, or how digital infrastructures and domestic routines shape their gendered dynamics. Much of the existing evidence is quantitative, focused on measuring time use or labour market participation. These studies are invaluable for mapping broad trends, but leave important questions unanswered: What does hybrid work feel like day to day? How do workers coordinate the constant movement between roles, responsibilities, and locations? How do organisational norms and social structures interact with the gender roles of hybrid working parents to produce new pressures and possibilities?

This thesis addresses these gaps by offering a rich, qualitative, sociomaterially grounded account of hybrid working parents in the UK. Through interviews and digital diaries with heterosexual, dual-earning mothers and fathers raising young children, I explore how hybrid work reshapes gendered labour, care practices, and organisational expectations. I argue that the flexibility afforded by hybrid work both enables new forms of parental involvement and professional participation *and* demands a distinct form of often-gendered labour I term coordinative labour: the ongoing temporal, spatial, and emotional work required to make flexibility function in practice. Understanding this duality is crucial not only for sociological theory, but also for the design of future policy and workplace interventions that aim to support genuinely equitable forms of flexible work. The digital platforms and devices used for coordinative labour play a key, constitutive role in allowing parents to combine work and care in new ways, making simultaneity, interruption, and ongoing availability central to the management of family life and hybrid work.

The following introduction situates hybrid work in the UK within its broader historical, social, and political context, outlining the gendered opportunities and challenges that have

emerged since its rapid adoption. It sets the stage for my core argument and research questions, demonstrating why a sociomaterial, qualitative approach is essential for understanding how hybrid work is gendered in the way it is organised and experienced in everyday life.

The New Normal: The Rise of Hybrid Work in the UK

Although working from home existed as a possibility prior to the pandemic, the transformative rupture caused by lockdown measures disrupted in-person working arrangements that were taken for granted. In turn, the pandemic rapidly accelerated what had previously been a slowly growing proportion of home-based workers, turning it into a mainstream and normalised practice for many office employees in the UK. In 2019, one year before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdown measures, around 12% of the UK workforce worked from home at least one day per week, and only 5% reported working mainly from home (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, Natasha, and Hobbs 2022). Flexible work arrangements that enabled workers greater discretion over the hours and location of their work were often either reserved for the most trusted, privileged workers, or were the domain of ‘mommy-track’ jobs that traded flexibility for career progression (Nicks, Burd, and Barnes 2019; Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl 2013).

Since the pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote and hybrid work, the UK now has one of the highest levels of ‘homeworking’ in the world (Select Committee on Home-Based Working 2025). While the number of people working only from home has decreased since lockdown measures were lifted, in its place a new model of work has emerged: hybrid work. Hybrid work is a type of flexible work where work is done partly from home or remotely and partly from the employer’s workspace, and, as shown by the ONS data in Figure 2 below, has evolved from a limited to a more mainstream practice in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Select Committee on Home-Based Working 2025).

Hybrid work is distinct from remote work – or telework as it is often referred to in the academic literature – because it is characterised by working interchangeably in different work locations, rather than working only “from home” (Lauring and Jonasson 2025). Most often, the different locations worked in are the office and the home. Alongside its interchangeable location, hybrid work has been conceptualised as encompassing dynamic switches across modality (face-to-face and digital) and temporality (constrained or synchronous and asynchronous) (Lauring and Jonasson 2025). In this sense, hybrid work can be defined by its flexibility across space, modality, and time. Between January and March 2025, the UK’s Office for National Statistics found that 28% of working adults in Great Britain were ‘hybrid working’, with the percentage rising to 55% amongst those in office-based occupations (Office for National Statistics 2025b; Select Committee on Home-Based Working 2025).

Percentage of working adults by working arrangement, Great Britain, May 2020 to March 2025

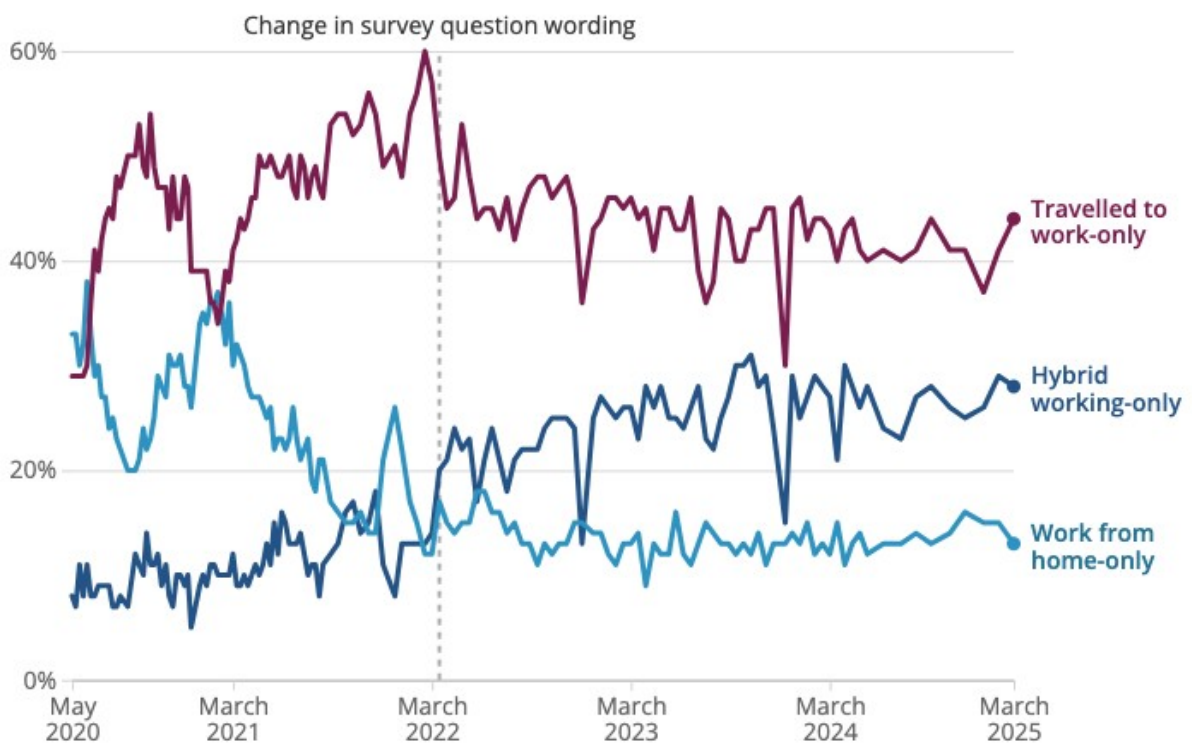


Figure 2. The proportion of workers engaged in hybrid working has increased since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: Office for National Statistics (2025).

To understand the significance of this transformation to the organisation of work, it is useful to consider how flexible working was framed in legislation before the pandemic. Before 2014, statutory flexible working rights in the UK were explicitly framed around caregiving. Under the Employment Act 2002, only employees with parental or caring responsibilities could request flexible working. In practice, this associated flexible work with mothers, reinforcing the idea that flexibility existed to support childcare (Select Committee on Home-Based Working 2025). The Children and Families Act 2014 marked a major shift, extending the right to request flexible working to all employees with 26 weeks continuous service, reflecting the attempt to help employees reconcile work and non-work lives. However, the 26-week qualifying period excluded up to 2.2 million employees from the entitlement and potentially deterred existing flexible workers from changing employers (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy 2021).

A post-implementation review of the Children and Families Act 2014 conducted by the UK government found that preexisting negative attitudes to flexible workers persisted, indicating that the shift in legislation did not amount to a shift in norms, and instead increased the number of individuals experiencing this prejudice, such as through worsened promotion prospects (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy 2021). The prejudice

against flexible workers has been described as ‘the flexibility stigma’, and refers to the penalties, biases, and negative judgements applied to employees who adopt flexible work arrangements, based on the assumption that flexibility signals a lack of commitment to the employer, competence, or ambition (Williams et al. 2013). The flexibility stigma is gendered, with women more likely to request flexibility to fulfil the caregiving responsibilities that they disproportionately perform and therefore are more likely to be seen as less dedicated workers¹.

Since the pandemic, the trajectory of reform to the legislation governing flexible work has accelerated. The UK government has sought to cement the growing normalisation of flexible work by strengthening employees’ statutory right to flexibility. The Employment Rights (Flexible Working) Act 2023, which came into force in April 2024, allows workers to request flexible working from day one in their new job and increases the number of requests they are able to make (Select Committee on Home-Based Working 2025). Further changes proposed by the Employment Rights Bill as part of the Government’s wider “Plan to Make Work Pay” would make flexible working “the default”, with employers required to accommodate requests as far as is “reasonable”, and businesses only able to refuse flexible working requests on specified business grounds, though these changes are not set to be implemented until 2027 (UK Parliament 2024). What distinguishes these recent and proposed reforms from earlier legislative interventions is their post-pandemic context. Once considered “avant-garde” (Vyas 2022: 158), practices such as hybrid work have become increasingly normalised, accepted, and, for many workers, expected.

¹ Scholars also emphasise that the flexibility stigma is classed, with working class and hourly workers often denied access to flexibility altogether and facing harsher penalties when they request it (Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl 2013).



Figure 3. Photo from the perspective of a person pushing a pram on an autumnal, woodland trail, with a golden retriever in the background. Shared via digital diary.

Hybrid Workers: Perceptions and Experiences

Flexible and hybrid work is preferred by a majority of workers, and is increasingly seen as necessary for modern employment practices (Chung and Yuan 2025). This preference can be explained by several interrelated factors, such as improved work-life balance, increased amount of time available, and increased flexibility and control over time. For instance, in the 2025 House of Lords Select Committee on Home-Based Working, 96% of surveyed hybrid workers reported improved work-life balance. Homeworkers reportedly save on average 56 minutes per day by not commuting (Office for National Statistics 2025b), and reported experiencing greater flexibility and control over their time when working from home (Taylor, Scholarios, and Howcroft 2021). These benefits are particularly appealing to parents and carers, enabling them to reduce time pressures and make it easier to juggle caring responsibilities with professional roles.

This thesis focuses on the gendered dynamics of hybrid work, and increased access to and control over time holds promise for mothers' participation in the labour market. Women remain overwhelmingly culturally associated with childcare and the domestic, which has negatively impacted their ability to participate in the labour market (Andrew et al. 2024).

Flexible work can help mothers to reconcile the competing demands of work and home. Research conducted during the pandemic found that mothers working remotely maintained paid work to a greater extent than mothers working on-site, whereas fathers' work hours did not differ by work location (Lyttelton, Zang, and Musick 2022). And, since the pandemic, research conducted in the US has found that increases in the feasibility of working from home in certain fields since the pandemic were associated with increased employment rates of mothers in those fields (Harrington and Kahn 2023). Harrington and Kahn (2023) suggest that as working from home becomes more widespread since the pandemic, the flexibility stigma that was once experienced by working mothers requesting to work from home for childcare is reduced, thus enabling mothers to access employment in previously incompatible fields. Furthermore, when men also work from home, there is evidence that the division of domestic labour and childcare is shared more evenly (Chung and Yuan 2025).



Figure 4. Image of a laptop at a kitchen table, surrounded by books, laundry, a high-chair, and other items related to childcare. Shared via digital diary.

Yet hybrid work produces strains as well as gains – both for hybrid workers with caregiving responsibilities, and more generally. While most parents of children under 18 reported that hybrid work made juggling their parenting responsibilities with work easier (69%), mothers were more likely than fathers to report that hybrid work made the juggling act harder (Ali et al. 2023). Women who work from home may take on more domestic work and face more distractions or interruptions from children (Chung et al. 2021; Select Committee on Home-Based Working 2025). More broadly, research suggests that, paradoxically, workers with

greater control over their hours may ultimately work longer hours (Chung 2022), and that the shift to hybrid and remote working may require an increase in work communication and coordination demands, resulting in more interrupted working time and longer work days (Gibbs, Mengel, and Siemroth 2021). The dissolution of physical boundaries between work and home and the greater reliance on ‘always-on’ digitalised technologies also contributes towards “blurred boundaries”, with workers struggling to switch off due to pressures to remain constantly visible online (Skountridaki, Lee, and Rouhani 2024). After assessing the existing evidence, The Select Committee of Home-Based Work (2025) found that though hybrid and remote work could promote greater work-life balance, it could also increase the risk of loneliness, social isolation, and burnout, concluding that not enough is known about the effect of continually switching between work and home on worker mental health.

Hybrid workers may also face a “hybrid ceiling”, with employees who work from home less likely to be considered for promotion, salary increase, and training than on-site workers (Kasperska, Matysiak, and Cukrowska-Torzewska 2024). This may be partly related to a lack of mentorship to those working from home and “proximity bias” to those onsite (Yang et al. 2022). Emanuel, Harrington, and Pallais (2023) find that physical distance weakens key channels of learning, visibility, and collaboration, slowing skill development and slowing promotion. Moreover, they find that women receive more feedback when sitting near teammates, and a much larger drop in feedback when working from home. When combined with the higher likelihood for parents – mothers, in particular – to work from home, this creates the potential for a two-tiered workforce in which hybrid working parents face disadvantage in the labour market because of their adoption of more flexible working arrangements, simply reframing the flexibility stigma rather than resolving it (Chung and Yuan 2025).

This Thesis

Despite the rapid normalisation of hybrid work, we lack an empirically grounded, sociomaterial understanding of how hybrid work reshapes gendered labour, care practices, and organisational norms amongst parents in the UK. Hybrid work can save time, allow women to return to paid work, and is perceived as improving work-life balance, but can also be associated with blurred boundaries, work intensification, and career penalties, indicating that hybrid work can both enable and constrain gender inequality. Hybrid work also disrupts longstanding professional norms around physical presence, working location, and flexibility, but we do not fully understand how these norms are shifting or how they map onto the gendered experience of work. The varied and contradictory context outlined above provides the backdrop to this thesis, which explores how hybrid work reconfigures the gendered organisation of care by understanding how, from the point of view of workers themselves, hybrid work is organised and experienced in practice. To understand this reconfiguration, this thesis began with three empirical questions:

1. Why do parents in the UK tech sector and other knowledge economy sectors engage in hybrid work?
2. How has the increased prevalence of hybrid working arrangements shaped the experience of work for women in the tech sector and other knowledge economy sectors, compared with men?
3. What insights can a mixed-modal qualitative study on hybrid working practices generate about the contemporary relationship between gender and workplace norms in the UK?

Through these research questions, I explore the new and enduring forms of gendered labour and norms that arise and embed with the normalisation of hybrid work, and I highlight how gendered inequalities appear within hybrid working households and organisations whilst considering the wider policy context.

Core Argument: Coordinative Labour

Previously, the incompatibility of onsite working hours with rigid childcare schedules may have required one parent in a dual-earning couple (often the mother) to scale back their labour market participation. In this thesis, I argue that hybrid work can open new possibilities for parents' participation in the labour market and in involved caregiving roles by shifting the expectations around the location and timing of paid labour. For hybrid working fathers, flexibility enables them to achieve physical presence and emotional intimacy with their children that their own fathers did not. For hybrid working mothers, flexibility enables their continued and improved participation in the workforce whilst also maintaining an involved and attentive role in their young child's life. The greater working time and location flexibility enables parents to spend more meaningful time with their children and to be more physically present in family routines. As professional norms evolve away from the expectation of continual presence, hybrid work also allows workers to strategically manage their onsite presence and professional development around their childcare responsibilities.

However, this newfound flexibility requires effort in its execution. The flexibility that enables hybrid workers to manage work and care hinges on new forms of planning, aligning, synchronising, and concealing their work and childcare demands. I argue that the reconciliation of work and family time that hybrid work offers simultaneously depends on what I term coordinative labour. I propose that coordinative labour involves two, interlocking dimensions: temporal coordination and spatial coordination. Coordinative labour occurs on behalf of oneself, one's partner and children, plus extended family members who may be involved in care, and involves a consideration of how others may emotionally respond to configurations of work and care in time and space.

Coordinative labour is deeply sociomaterial (Orlikowski 2007), constituted through parents' reliance on digital calendars, communication platforms, phones, and notifications, that

orchestrate the management of work and family life. I find that coordinative labour is disproportionately undertaken by hybrid working mothers (and men who may be positioned as primary caregivers within the family) contributing towards stress, guilt, and shame and a “dense” (Wajcman 2015) experience of time that stems from novel forms of strain-based work-family conflict embedded by hybrid work. I also highlight examples where couples take a more collaborative approach to coordinative labour as evidence for the fragile seeds of normative change that could be supported via organisational and social policy.

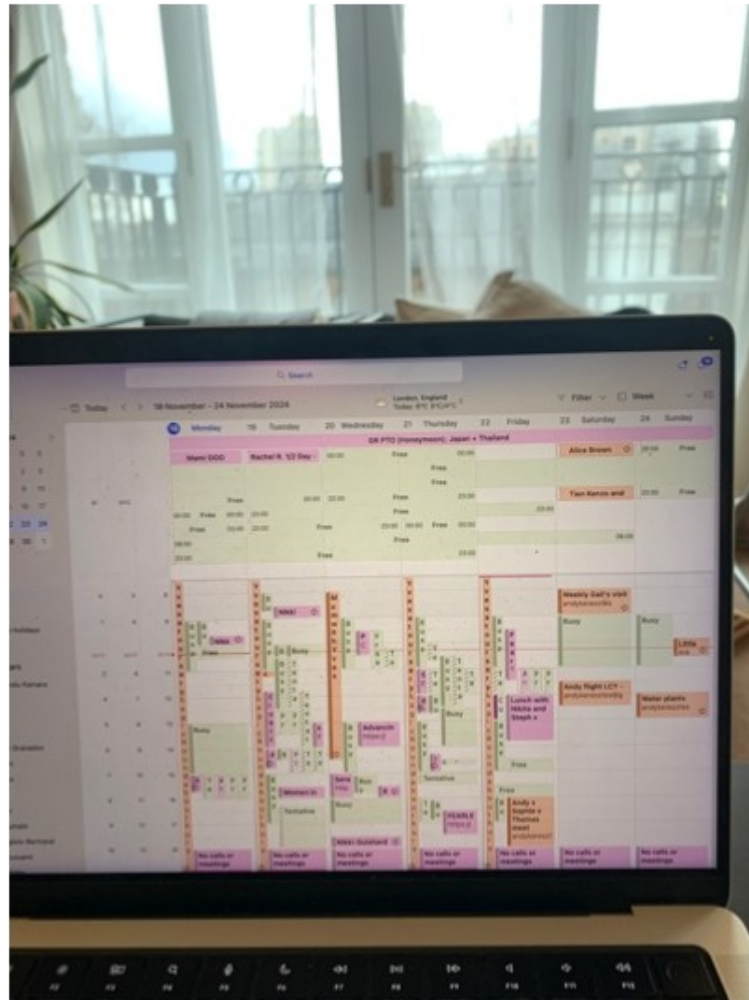


Figure 5. A photo of a laptop screen showing a complicated, colour-coded digital calendar. In the background is a plant, windows, and the top of a sofa. Shared via digital diary.

Despite the often-unequal responsibility for coordination, many mothers in the study state their preference for hybrid work, which highlights the practical advantages that hybrid work affords them as well as the limited alternatives available in the UK. This thesis demonstrates that the UK’s social and policy landscape reproduces gendered divisions of labour, including coordinative labour. The gendered parental leave policies and inadequate, expensive childcare provisions lead middle-class families in this study to rely on individualised strategies of coordination that stitch together patchworks of care. These strategies rely heavily on women’s time, planning, and digital management. Therefore, hybrid work is not

only a preferred arrangement but an essential mechanism through which families absorb the consequences of weak institutional and policy support.

Literature

This thesis builds on feminist sociological scholarship on the work-family axis (Williams 2001a), which refers to the complex and bidirectional relationship between the gendered roles associated with professional and family life, drawing from established concepts such as the ideal worker norm (Williams 2001), gendered organisations (Acker 1990), intensive mothering (1990), and emotional labour (Hochschild 1979). I also synthesize and build on concepts within the literature that are growing in importance, such as cognitive labour (Daminger 2019) and the mental load (Dean, Churchill, and Ruppner 2022; Helgøy and Weeks 2025).

I bring these literatures together with Orlikowski's (2007) sociomaterial approach that considers digital technologies and, indeed, all material environments, as active participants that, entangled with social norms, constitute and organise social life. The sociomaterial lens has most often been applied to the adoption of technologies within organisations to understand how the material environment and the social context constitutively entangle to give rise to new organisational norms that are both material and social in nature (Mazmanian 2013; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, and Yates 2013; Scott and Orlikowski 2014). By paying attention to the organising power of technologies, this thesis asks not only what new forms of gendered labour arise under hybrid work, but how these forms are produced through the sociomaterial entanglement of digital infrastructure with everyday family and organisational life, exploring how hybrid work that is mediated through calendars, platforms, phones, and notifications reconfigures gendered inequalities across households, organisations, and national policy contexts.

In bringing these conceptual approaches together, I extend existing literature by framing coordinative labour not simply as another form of cognitive labour or mental load, held inside the heads of women, but as produced through interactions between people, technologies, and organisations.

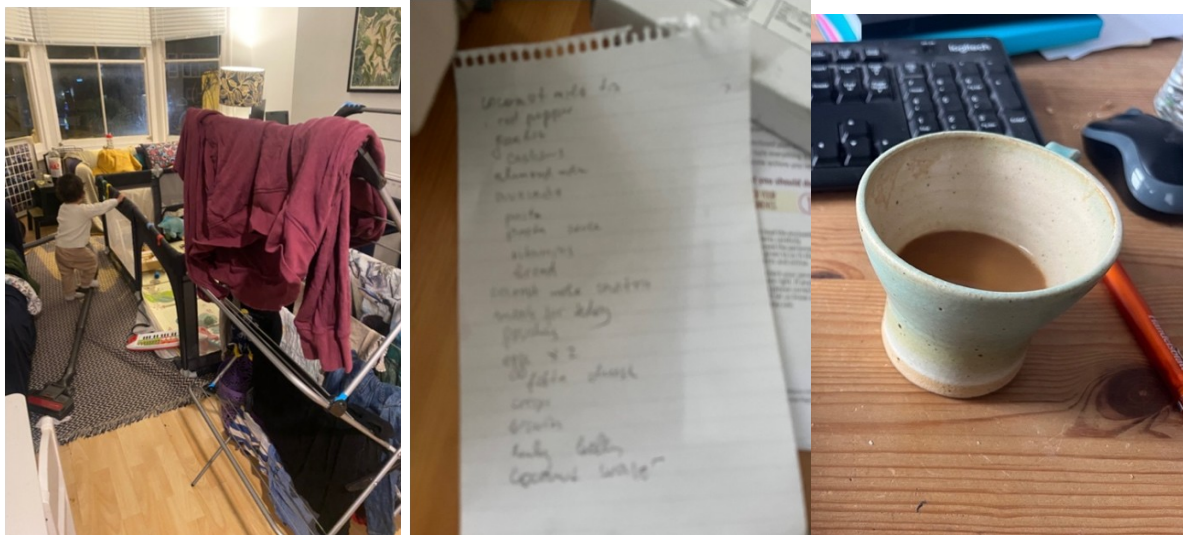


Figure 6. Three images shared via digital diary. From left to right: a child holding on to their playpen in the living room, surrounded by hanging laundry. A shopping list written on a scrap of notebook paper. A mug of coffee with a keyboard, mouse, and pencil in the background.

Methods

This thesis takes a multi-modal qualitative approach that combines semi-structured interviews with digital diary studies to enable both reflective and narrative accounts of daily routines and more immediate, intimate, in-the-moment data about family life, work practices, and emotional experiences. My approach is grounded in an abductive logic (Agar 2006) that moves iteratively between empirical data and existing theories, refining theoretical constructs as new data is collected and analysed. In taking this epistemological approach, my study responds to gaps in the existing literature, which is currently dominated by quantitative studies on hybrid and remote work, domestic labour, and gender inequality, that offer limited insights into the mechanisms and everyday processes that shape gendered experiences of hybrid work. By focusing on lived experience and the quotidian, this research seeks to understand *how* and *why* hybrid work interacts with gender norms, rather than how much.

I conducted 48 interviews and collected 15 one-to-two-week digital diaries. Participants were recruited using theoretical sampling which aimed for diversity within analytically relevant categories, rather than statistical representativeness. The study focuses on heterosexual, dual-earning couples raising young children, working in the tech-sector and other knowledge economy roles, who have hybrid work arrangements that combine remote and office-based work. Though the sample was initially limited to tech professionals, it expanded to include partners in non-tech professions and other relevant knowledge economy workers, reflecting the iterative and adaptive nature of qualitative research. Interviews included both members of several couples to examine divergences and convergences within households.

Many studies of cognitive labour and the mental load rely on interviews or surveys. This study's triangulation of interviews with digital diaries is therefore unique; through text, audio,

and videos, participants documented their mornings, workdays, evenings, and provided snapshots into their home and work environments. This method produced intimate, fine-grained insights into spatial and temporal rhythms, emotional responses, and the entanglement of work and family life with digital tools.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured as follows:

Conceptual and Methodological Framing

Chapter 2 Literature Review grounds this thesis's analysis in feminist works that argue that gender inequality persists because the work-family axis is sustained by deep-rooted cultural norms, organisational structures, and policy regimes that continue to associate men with paid work and women with caregiving, even in ostensibly egalitarian contexts. It establishes the need to understand hybrid work through a sociomaterial lens, showing how digital infrastructures, shifting professional norms, and enduring gender norms produce new forms of labour and inequality. In this chapter, I define and set forth my conceptual contribution: coordinative labour.

Chapter 3 Methodology argues that qualitative, multi-modal methods are essential for uncovering the lived experiences, micro-practices, and relational dynamics of hybrid working that quantitative studies cannot access. It contends that studying the everyday, through interviews and diary studies, reveals the subtle mechanisms through which the greater flexibility of hybrid work reshapes gendered norms, labour, and care.

Empirical Findings

My empirical chapters are ordered to illustrate how couple, organisational, and societal-level dynamics and norms interlock to shape the gendered experience of hybrid work – see Figure 7 below for a visual representation. Coordinative labour emerges within and across these levels.

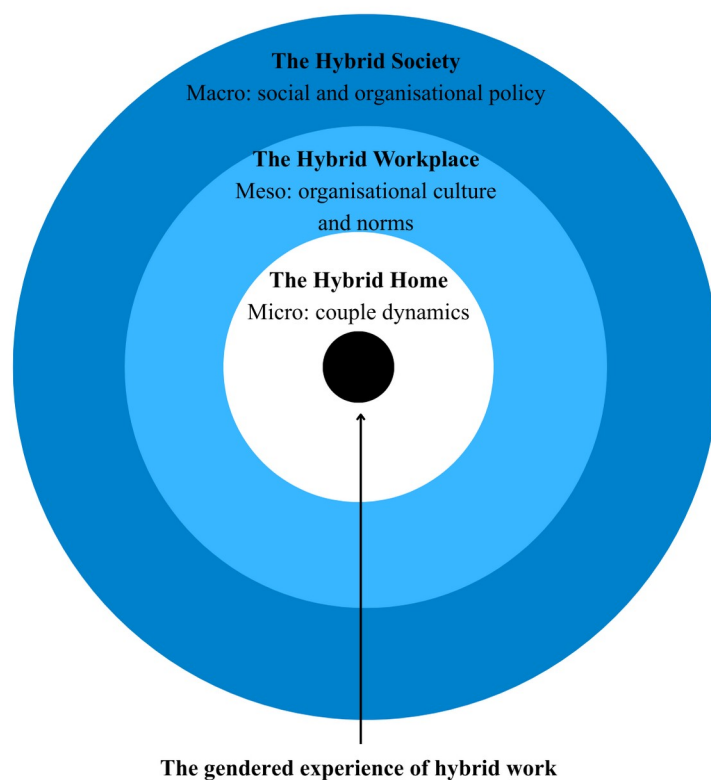


Figure 7. Nested model reflecting how micro-level couple dynamics, meso-level organisational cultures, and macro-level societal norms interlock to shape the gendered experience of hybrid work.

Chapter 4 The Hybrid Home is the first of three empirical chapters. In this chapter, I argue that hybrid work arrangements reshape domestic life by enabling greater parental participation in routine, day-to-day care during the working day, while simultaneously giving rise to stress, guilt, and a dense experience of time. I show that though hybrid work allows families to share visible tasks, the underpinning coordination of family life is disproportionately borne by mothers.

Chapter 5 The Hybrid Workplace finds that organisational cultures and digital infrastructures shape how hybrid workers coordinate the visibility of care when working from home, producing a spectrum from concealment-driven ideal worker cultures to more care-inclusive environments. I find that hybrid work both enables flexibility and embeds new temporal pressures, requiring workers – mothers, in particular – to navigate blurred boundaries and strategically manage their onsite presence to remain professionally visible.

Chapter 6 The Hybrid Society is the final empirical chapter, which argues that hybrid work operates as a fragile, individualised buffer that helps middle-class families cope with a weak policy environment characterised by inadequate childcare provision, gendered parental leave, and uneven organisational attitudes towards flexibility. I suggest that without stronger institutional support, from both organisations and the government, hybrid work alone cannot undo gendered divisions of labour and may intensify newly significant forms of gendered labour.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Chapter 7 Conclusion wraps up this thesis by arguing that while hybrid work expands opportunities for both parents to participate in care and paid work, it simultaneously requires new forms of gendered labour and responsibilities that fall disproportionately on women. It establishes coordinative labour as a theoretical contribution explaining why hybrid work can both unsettle and reinforce gendered inequalities and offers recommendations that are designed to remove institutional and material barriers to the enactment of more egalitarian divisions of labour and responsibility.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

To establish the theoretical foundation on which this research builds, this chapter provides an overview of relevant literatures from a range of scholarly conventions and disciplines, broadly concerning what has been described as the “work-family axis” (Williams 2001). The work-family axis refers to the complex and bidirectional relationship between the gendered demands, responsibilities, and roles associated with paid employment and family life. It is widely accepted that the gendered norms that associate women with unpaid caregiving have significantly limited their ability to participate in the labour market: women in the UK have less time for paid work, are more likely to work part-time, earn lower wages, and have fewer opportunities for leisure (Francis-Devine, Zaidi, and Murray 2025). Similarly, gendered norms that position men as the family breadwinners may limit the extent to which they participate in the domestic sphere. I situate my review within this literature because, due to the increased availability of flexible hybrid working models, working parents may be better able to autonomously manage their work around their family responsibilities, thus addressing or reconfiguring some of the issues arising from the work-family axis.

There is a vast literature exploring the work-family axis. Acknowledging that this review cannot comprehensively cover all theoretical perspectives or empirical findings, I review key feminist sociological and economic theories and empirical studies that explain the normative and structural conditions which reinforce the traditionally gendered experience of the work-family axis. I also weave in a sociomaterial perspective (Orlikowski 2007) to highlight the active role played by the digital infrastructures that mediate contemporary work and family life. The sociomaterial lens reveals how the use of these technologies is entangled with gender norms in the household and the workplace to generate specific gendered experiences of and responsibilities for the management of work and care.

This review is split into three key sections. The first section sets out the work-family axis as a whole; the second dives into literature on ideal workers and gendered organisations; the third explores intensive mothering cultures. Following the main literature review, I set out my Research Statement which establishes the aims and rationale of this project. Finally, I offer a definition for the key conceptual contribution of this thesis: coordinative labour.

The Work-Family Axis

What is the work-family axis of gender?

In the 1960s, women joined the UK labour market in increasing numbers (Crompton 2006). In the 1970s and 1980s, the formal barriers that prevented women’s progress in employment

were removed². These sweeping changes to the workforce have often been called a ‘revolution’. Yet, as Hochschild famously put it, “the gender revolution has stalled” (Hochschild and Machung 2012). Despite formal gender equality in the workplace, gendered inequalities continue to persist, reflected by the gender pay gap, which increases for mothers; this is termed ‘the motherhood penalty’ by economists (Budig and England 2001). Gender inequality is visible in patterns of occupational segregation at the seniority level, industry level, and job role level, and these inequalities are even starker when segmented into ethnicity and socioeconomic status (House of Commons Library 2022). The persistence of gendered inequality, even after formal barriers were lifted, suggests that normative and structural mechanisms continue to underpin the labour market’s gender dynamics. These mechanisms operate along what scholars describe as the work–family axis (Williams 2001), a term used to describe the mutually reinforcing relationship between the organisation of paid work and unpaid care that continues to shape gendered inequality at home and at work.

This research contributes to literature that critically examines the “work-family axis” (Williams 2001) of gender. Previous work into the work-family axis has shown how the gendered cultural, normative, and structural systems that divide paid work and unpaid care uphold gender inequality (e.g Blair-Loy 2003; Collins 2019; Hochschild and Machung 2012; Stone 2008; J. C. Williams 2001). Put simply, these gendered systems associate successful masculinity with paid work outside of the home, and successful femininity with unpaid caregiving labour within the home³. These associations both inform and are upheld by cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and social policy. The widening of the gender pay gap after the age of 30 provides a visible manifestation of how the feminisation of caregiving roles constrains women’s participation in the labour market, as the mean age of mothers giving birth in 2021 in the UK was 30.9 (Francis-Devine 2024). In the following section, I will sketch out some of the most influential sociological conceptualisations of the work-family axis, before outlining how my research builds on and extends this body of work.

Theorists of the work-family axis

In her influential book *Unbending Gender*, Williams (2001) analyses employment law, family law, and workplace law in the U.S. to propose the concept of domesticity, a social and legal system through which gender inequality is produced via the division of productive and reproductive labour. Originally coined by Marxist theorist Engels, the concept of reproductive labour describes unpaid domestic activities that reproduce the labour power needed for productive labour, which is labour that creates value and can either be exchanged for capital or produces a good to be sold (Smith 2013). Tracing its development from its

² For example, the UK’s 1970 Equal Pay Act and 1975 Sex Discrimination Act were enshrined in law with the aim of setting equal pay for equal work, and to make it unlawful to discriminate in the workplace on the basis of sex. (Centre for Longitudinal Studies 2021)

³ It is important to highlight that the picture is more complex than the binary breadwinner-homemaker division might suggest. These inequalities intersect with other axes of social stratification, including race, occupation, and socioeconomic status, to shape gendered divisions of labour inside and outside of the home, with racially minoritised women experiencing compounded disadvantages in pay and progression.

origins in 19th century Europe, Williams proposes that the system of domesticity is predicated on three, interdependent elements. First, employers are entitled to demand what she describes as the “ideal worker”, who has immunity from family and domestic work (reproductive labour) and is instead continuously available to the employer. The second element involves the husband’s right and obligation to live up to this ideal. The final element of domesticity is the duty of the mother as someone whose life should prioritise caregiving and management of the domestic, thus defining women’s work as centred around the home and the family – elsewhere described as the intensive mothering norm (Hays 1996).

In other work, Williams (1991) describes how the prevalent rhetoric of choice in the US obscures the constraints imposed on women by the gendered system of domesticity, which she argues leaves women with “different and less desirable choices” (p1559) than men. For example, Stone’s study (2008) finds that the choice to ‘opt out’ of work among women with high-powered, elite careers is not due to an inherent or essentialised mothering instinct that overpowers career ambition, but comes in response to the clash between privatised families and demanding careers, for which women feel individually responsible. These analyses situate the experience of women, domesticity, and the work-family axis within the broader context of social policy, which can exacerbate demands on individual women. Constraints on choice are even more binding for working-class women and racially minoritised women, who may have less of a buffer to absorb interruptions to their paid labour.

Whereas Williams emphasizes legal structure, Blair-Loy (2003) foregrounds ‘cultural schemas’ in her analysis of 53 interviews with women in top executive positions. Cultural schemas are the shared and publicly understood, socially constructed frameworks that inform individual desires. Blair-Loy identifies two schemas, the work devotion schema and the family devotion schema, that underpin the organisation of family and work, rationalising and guiding individuals toward distinct and unequal gendered patterns, such as those visible in the UK labour market. The work devotion schema casts long working hours as a moral or spiritual calling, closely tied to an elite masculinity built around the role of provider⁴. The family devotion schema, by contrast, turns “labour into love” (Boydston 1994), which Williams describes as the “spiritualization of housework” and the “sacralization of childcare” (Williams 2001). This ideology positions childrearing as the central source of meaning in a woman’s life. To reconcile these ‘competing devotions’ (Blair-Loy 2003), women have, prior to the pandemic, been more likely than men to scale back their labour market participation after children, such as by engaging in “mommy-tracked” part-time work that lacks upward mobility, or dropping out of the labour market completely to care for children and offset high childcare costs (Williams et al. 2013).

⁴ Blair-Loy’s writing on the work devotion schema builds on the Weberian concept of the Protestant work ethic, which suggests that Protestant values of hard work, discipline, and frugality encouraged the development of capitalism by linking economic success to moral virtue (Weber 1904/2012).

Due to the gender-essentialist cultural and institutional devaluation of the characteristics and activities traditionally associated with women – i.e. domestic and care responsibilities – England (2010) argues that men have had low incentives to increase their traditionally female activities such as homemaking or female-dominated occupations, whereas women had powerful economic incentives to move into the traditionally male spheres of paid employment and male-typical occupation. In a widely read and cited qualitative study on couples in the US, Hochschild and Machung (2012) find that heterosexual married working women thus take on a ‘second shift’; shouldering a larger burden of household and caregiving labour, whilst also being expected to live up to the masculine norms of ideal worker white-collar cultures that equate face time with career devotion.

This devaluation of care is not only individual or cultural but entangled with social policy. In her cross-national comparative qualitative study, Collins (2019) finds that states reflect and reinforce gender ideologies by implementing different types of work-family policies that are bound up in each state’s history and cultural perspective on what is “right” for men and women when it comes to work and caregiving. For example, Collins finds that in the US, mothers internalise and individualise the responsibility for work-family conflict due to the lack of state support, such as federal paid parental support. This echoes Stone’s study of elite women who become mothers, highlighting the crucial constraining effect a lack of supportive social policy can have on mothers. Conversely, because of strong policy support and egalitarian norms, Collins (2019) finds that mothers in Sweden often expect institutional, partner, and employer support. As she states: “Work-family conflict is the product of public policies and cultural attitudes that must change if we are to improve the lives of mothers and their families” (p7).

The structural context becomes particularly salient when attempting to understand why such inequalities persist when couples in the UK increasingly report preferring gender-egalitarian relationships. Agreement that a man’s job is to earn money and a woman’s job is to look after the home and family has declined in the UK by 39 percentage points since 1987, from 48% to 9% in 2022 (Allen and Stevenson 2023). Within this gender egalitarian model, fathers are increasingly co-opted into the expectations of intensive parenting, and ‘good’ fathering is seen as being involved with and emotionally present for children as well as providing economically for the family (Faircloth 2014). While some policy measures, such as the introduction of Shared Parental Leave, reflect this cultural shift, the low take-up and continuation of gendered inequalities in the labour market and domestic spheres suggests that cultural and structural barriers persist. In Chapter 6: The Hybrid Society, I analyse current UK parental leave policy and interview data to show that, although gender inclusive policies exist, their design fails to include key features that would incentivise fathers to take longer leave. Combined with stigmatising workplace attitudes, this often leads families to follow the policy path of least resistance, reinforcing women’s role as primary caregivers and men’s role as primary earners.

Recent work from Wong (2023) finds in the US context that there is a ‘structural lag’ between the individually held, egalitarian desires of heterosexual couples, and the structural barriers they encounter. For many, structural and cultural barriers, such as the lack of access to well-compensated, flexible, and equal parental leave, contribute to uneven gendered divisions of labour that contradict their egalitarian ideals. Wong and Daminger (2024) suggest that egalitarian couples often justify the prioritisation of men’s paid work and the acceptance of women’s disproportionate domestic labour through the individualised belief that they are mutually pursuing the household’s best interests and emphasizing “us”. In the UK context, Faircloth (2022) examines how the tension between gender egalitarian desires, individualist rhetorics, and structural constraints gave rise to conflict and disappointment in couples with newborns, particularly among women, illustrating how structural lag manifests on the affective and interpersonal level. However, a small number of couples in Wong’s (2023) study achieved more equal arrangements through supportive workplace conditions, a shared commitment to equally dividing work and family responsibilities, and deliberate coordination to leverage these enabling contexts, allowing them to resist gender inequalities at work and at home. These contributions to the work–family debate underscore the need to examine how structural lag, normative expectations, and cultural ideals intersect within national policy regimes and organisational culture, which this thesis builds upon to explore the U.K. context in greater depth.

Flexible work: Problematizing the work-family ‘time bind’

Most studies that critically examine the work–family axis argue that norms, institutional arrangements, and public policies create a “time bind” that constrains women’s time. This bind forces women to juggle or choose between work and care and, because of the previously described enduring cultural expectations and structural barriers, women often “choose” care while men “choose” work. For instance, part-time work is much more common amongst women: 36% of women in employment in the UK worked part-time, compared with 14% of men (Francis-Devine et al. 2025). As economist Goldin (2021) observes, “time is the enemy of women’s quest for career and family” (p. 216). In her longitudinal study of college-educated women in the United States, Goldin finds that although progress has been made since the dominance of the breadwinner–homemaker model, a two-tiered system remains in the labour market in which women in their thirties and forties must often choose between starting a family and advancing their careers, limiting the time they can devote to professional progression. Building on Goode’s (1960) role strain theory, Voydanoff (2002) argues that the accumulation of multiple roles increases demands and incompatibilities, leading to role conflict and psychological strain. This strain explains the negative outcomes that can result from the work-family interface. Conflict may be produced by overload, when an individual lacks the time to execute all roles, or interference, when conflicting demands make it difficult to fulfil the requirement of multiple roles. When demands from work and family roles are incompatible, stress increases and satisfaction and performance at work decreases, which can harm one’s career trajectory. Voydanoff cites gender as a moderating

factor to role strain, highlighting that gender shapes how people experience multiple roles and how much strain or ease they feel.

To give an example in practical terms, parents in the UK have struggled to reconcile caregiving responsibilities with their working hours. For example, primary schools in the UK finish between 3:15 and 3:30pm, whereas standard office hours finish at either 5pm, 6pm, or later. While wraparound care is often available on at least a limited basis for busy, working families, parents in this study reported a preference for collecting children from school on at least some days. Furthermore, as explored in Chapter 6, afterschool care can be patchy and difficult to secure. The difference between pre-pandemic working arrangements and post-pandemic working arrangements amongst parents who now follow a hybrid model is the access to far greater flexibility and spatio-temporal autonomy during the working day. These shifting working arrangements radically alter the possibilities for the temporal and spatial organisation of the work-life axis, with significant implications for women's ability to temporally manage their roles as mothers and workers. Written prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most, if not all, studies of the work-family axis I have cited propose access to greater flexibility at work as one of the key solutions to the stalled gender revolution – alongside stronger state support for parents. For instance, Hochschild (2012) proposes organisational and social policies such as flexible working and sick child leave as mechanisms to improve gender equality in the workplace. More recently, Wong (2023) proposes better remote work options as one of the mechanisms to enable couples to enact gender egalitarian ideals. This study therefore explores whether the increased prevalence and normalisation of a hybrid working model, which is based on far greater flexibility and homeworking, constitutes a partial resolution to the gendered 'structural lag' in the UK context.

However, I also suggest that it is vital to move beyond conceptualising time as a neutral, quantifiable resource that can be allocated between competing roles. While previous studies explain how the cultural and structural context might constrain how women choose to spend their limited time, most assume time as an objective measure. However, time can be analysed as a socially organised, embodied, and gendered phenomenon. For example, Bittman and Wajcman (2000) find that whilst men and women in Australia have access to similar quantifiable amounts of leisure time, that time is not experienced equally. While men and women may have access to similar quantities of leisure time, women's leisure time is more interrupted, multi-tasked, and bound up in paid work and childcare, whereas men's leisure time tends to be continuous and uninterrupted.

In later work, Wajcman (2015) describes the 'time pressure paradox', which highlights how people report feeling harried and stressed, despite also having greater access to leisure time than in prior historical periods. Within this paradox, she finds that feeling harried is gendered. Women's leisure time is often experienced as less leisurely than men because it is more likely to be overlaid and punctuated with care tasks, such as the woman who watches TV whilst

ironing. This highlights limitations in quantitative time-use studies of domestic labour: is that woman engaged in a leisure activity or domestic work? Similarly, while time-use studies that compare women and men's time spent in paid work and unpaid caregiving are invaluable in estimating total labour time, Doucet (2023) contends that responsibilities for care do not unfold in linear or fixed units of time but are instead messier, relational processes that are more difficult to measure because they are ongoing, affective, and interdependent⁵. This relational understanding of time invites a re-examination of hybrid work's temporal flexibility. Rather than simply enabling a rational reallocation of time between work and care, I find that flexibility generates new forms of overload and gendered strain, as the capacity to better manage competing demands coexists with heightened expectations of constant, digitalised availability that enable the simultaneity of roles.

Applying a sociomaterial lens

As I explore in this chapter and throughout the thesis, the digital infrastructures of remote work play a key role in reconfiguring the gendered experience of time and the management of responsibilities. Beyond sociological and economic analyses of the work-family axis, my study therefore draws from sociomaterial (Orlikowski 2007) traditions that can account for how material infrastructures, such as digital devices and platforms, co-constitute the gendered practices of work and family among hybrid workers. While sociological analyses have unravelled the ways that gender is normatively and structurally constituted, and economists have distilled the material impact of these norms on women's ability to participate in the workforce, less attention has been paid to how digital technologies are entangled with and productive of the broader cultural norms and socioeconomic backdrop of the work-family axis (notable exceptions focus primarily on digital parenting practices, e.g. Andelsman Alvarez 2025; Heaselgrave 2025; Lim 2020, though do not specifically apply sociomateriality as a lens). I suggest that the role of digital technologies becomes particularly pertinent in the context studied, as the ability for men and women to more flexibly manage their time around care when working in a hybrid model is facilitated through the adoption and proliferation of digital tools and technologies that allow for collaborative and solo work to happen at a distance.

This thesis is not an analysis of technological change. Rather it is an analysis of how the shifting organisation and expectations of work map onto the gendered experience of the work-family axis. While technology enables hybrid work to take place, hybrid work is not happening at its current rate *because* of technology. Instead, the rapid adoption of hybrid work arose as a consequence of the lockdown measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, hybrid work may enact existing gendered workplace and family norms in new

⁵ Doucet is inspired by Davies's (1994) distinction between 'clock time' and 'process time'. Davies defines process time as time embedded in the social relations of care, oriented around the needs and realities of the care receiver rather than the clock. In contrast to the linear, task-oriented temporality of wage labour ('clock time'), process time is non-linear and relational: several caring processes may intertwine simultaneously, and the care receiver's perceived needs determine the temporal flow.

sociomaterial configurations. Within this changing set of circumstances, technology plays a key role, not only as the neutral backdrop that facilitates communication at a distance, but as an active participant in gendered relations and experiences of work and home.

A sociomaterial perspective encourages an understanding of how materiality is not simply a mediating force, but is constitutive of the social relations it organises (Scott and Orlikowski 2014). Scott and Orlikowski encourage analysts to consider the entanglement and inseparability of (social) meaning and (material) matter. They suggest that many analyses either treat technologies as discrete artefacts that influence humans, or ignore a consideration of the material context in their focus on social relations and dynamics. Orlikowski (2007) gives the example of a private equity firm where all employees adopt BlackBerry devices for email. Push notifications on the device alert employees instantaneously when they receive an email, reinforcing a firm culture that already expected commitment, responsiveness, and professionalism. Over time, expectations of constant, remote availability and instant response emerge, blurring boundaries between work and personal life, with workers checking their BlackBerrys late at night or while on holiday. Therefore, Orlikowski argues that the technical design and the social norms of the firm are inseparable, and together mutually constitute new, always-on ways of working.

Sociomaterial perspectives on meaning and matter tend to be relatively gender-neutral. While Orlikowski and Scott provide a valuable language for examining how materiality and meaning are intertwined and how evolving norms emerge, their framework offers limited attention to gender and power relations. By integrating sociomaterial insights with feminist analyses of the work–family axis, this study situates the sociomaterial entanglements of work and care in hybrid working arrangements within the broader dynamics of gendered social organisation explored in feminist sociology. Applying a sociomaterial perspective therefore enables a nuanced understanding of how the technologies of hybrid work intersect with organisational cultures and domestic norms to produce divergent experiences and expectations for men and women in the management of work and care.

Gendered Organisations Before and After the Pandemic

In this section, I engage with analysis of the ‘work’ side of the work-family axis. I synthesize canonical theory and empirical work from Williams (Williams 2001b, 2001a), Acker (1990), and Budig and England (2001) on the ideal worker, the gendered organisation, and the motherhood penalty, with a consideration of more recent contributions from Goldin (2021) on greedy work. I consider how empirical work has built on and compensated for limitations in these theories. Then, I explore how digitalisation, flexible work and working from home fit into this normative context, and what has (and has not) changed since the pandemic.

What is the ideal worker culture, and why does it matter for gender equality?

In the 1990s, two key theories emerged to explain the persistent gender inequality in the labour market: the ideal worker norm (Williams 2001) and gendered organisations (1990). Williams's conception of the ideal worker reflects a historically specific model of white-collar, elite masculinity that emerged in corporate workplaces in the mid-twentieth century. In Williams's (2001) original argument, she highlights the "widespread sense that employers are entitled to workers with limited caregiving responsibilities," (p20), which reflects and reproduces the sharp cultural division between work and family. By virtue of their lack of significant responsibilities for childrearing or housework, the ideal worker is expected to prioritise continual availability to the employer, such as by working long hours or travelling. For example, Williams illustrates this through evidence that corporate managers in the 1970s routinely worked sixty hours a week or more, often leaving home at 7:30 a.m. and returning twelve hours later, demonstrating that the ideal worker is defined by total commitment and constant availability to their employer, which precludes their involvement in caregiving. Overall, Williams finds that ideal worker cultures are implicitly framed around the traditional heteronormative life patterns of men who engage in full-time, continuous labour, whose invisible female partners are assumed to be taking care of the home and family.

Extending this with longitudinal economic analysis of the labour market participation of college-educated women, economist Goldin (2021) finds that the key mechanism upholding gender inequality in the labour market is the structure of "greedy work". Greedy work describes jobs where pay increases disproportionately with the number of hours worked, particularly when those hours are inflexible or overtime. High-paying, high-pressure jobs in sectors like finance, law, and management often demand their workers be available at unusual times outside their legally contracted hours. To maximise a family's income while managing caregiving, Goldin finds that heterosexual couples will often allocate one partner to greedy work and the other to lower paid, more flexible work. This division is often gendered, with women adopting flexible work after having children, though, as an economist Goldin does not thoroughly explore the normative or cultural mechanisms driving this.

Linked to this, groundbreaking economic analyses from Budig and England (2001) finds evidence for 'the motherhood penalty', finding a wage penalty of 7% per child. These penalties are larger for married women than unmarried women. They propose four key mechanisms for this penalty: the loss of job experience due to taking time out of the workforce for childcare, reduced effort or productivity due to competing time demands, the prioritisation of family-friendly policy over pay, and employer discrimination. Recent data in the UK supports this: five years after their first child, mothers' earnings decrease by on average £1051 per month compared with their salary one year before having a child (Office for National Statistics 2025a). Taken together, Williams's normative critique and the economic analyses from Goldin and Budig and England represent a strong feminist challenge to the gendered expectations and structure of white-collar work, pointing to the interwoven material and symbolic mechanisms that reproduce inequality.

Williams's ultimate argument is that genuine equality demands a transformation of the very organisation of paid work and care, rather than simply hiring more women. Likewise, Goldin suggests that rather than women "leaning in", workplaces should design jobs to be less greedy. As Williams concludes, the organisation of paid work and caregiving leaves women with children with two options: to perform as ideal workers by outsourcing family responsibilities, or be pushed into low-paid and low seniority "mommy-track" or "women's work". Similarly, Goldin finds that greedy jobs create a "leaky pipeline" of female professionals. In pointing to the gendered expectations implicit within the culture and structure of white-collar employment, Williams emphasizes how equality cannot be achieved merely through the removal of formal barriers to women's participation in the workforce. She critiques previous modes of feminism that pushed for women's equal integration into the masculinised model of full-time, uninterrupted work that depend on outsourcing childcare. Williams points out that outsourcing care preserves the ideal worker system and reproduces class and racial hierarchies through a dynamic where privileged women buy time by employing poorer, often racially minoritised women for care. Ultimately, this continues to devalue care. This echoes Fraser (2018), who argues that neoliberal capitalism creates a 'crisis of care', which systematically devalues unpaid and underpaid socially reproductive labour while also inherently depending on it for its continuation. As a solution, both Fraser and Williams demand a fundamental restructure of work and family life – a reconstruction of the system of domesticity – oriented towards sharing the responsibility for caregiving rather than individualising it as a woman's responsibility. Fraser describes this as the 'dual caregiver' model. According to Williams, this begins with reconfiguring the "ideal worker". For instance, as a legal scholar, she proposes that sex discrimination law be used to attack the structures that define the ideal worker as someone with no childcare responsibilities.

Williams's ideal worker concept highlights how cultural norms and legal systems shape the gendered bifurcation of work and family. While rich, insightful, and influential, Williams's analysis often remains limited to an abstractive, normative critique and risks underspecifying the mechanisms that reproduce ideal worker norms. In her work on gendered organisations, Acker (1990) turns attention to how the structural features and processes *within* organisations reproduce gender in organisations. Critiquing the notion that organisations are neutral backgrounds to the gender bias that is enacted by individuals, Acker proposes five gendered organisational processes: the gendered division of labour within an organisation, the construction of symbols and images, workplace interactions, individual identities, and organisational logic. Together, these processes embed gender into their very logic and creation. Acker argues that images of men's bodies and masculinity pervade organisational processes, contributing to organisational gender segregation.

To take gendered organisational logic as an example, Acker notes how job evaluation systems, which refer to the formal methods organisations use to rank jobs and set pay, are not neutral tools, but reproduce masculinised managerial values. Jobs are evaluated as abstract entities, separate from the worker who performs them, creating what Acker calls the

“abstract, bodiless worker”. Yet this worker is implicitly male, disembodied, and unencumbered by caregiving responsibilities. Managers often draw on gender stereotypes when developing these systems, privileging masculine qualities and consequently reifying them: these “rational-technical, ostensibly gender neutral, control systems are built upon and conceal a gendered substructure [...] in which men’s bodies fill abstract jobs.” (Acker 1990: 154). The gendered substructure refers to these invisible processes in organisations in which gendered beliefs about masculinity and femininity are embedded and reproduced. Acker, Williams, and Goldin’s ideas together highlight how gender operates at both the normative, economic, and structural level. Rather than a matter of individual bias or occupational choice, gendered inequalities are continually reproduced through institutional logics and ideal-worker norms that define whose bodies and life patterns fit the model of ideal work.

The longevity of the concepts of the ideal worker norm and gendered organisations is apparent from their broad diffusion. Scholars from a variety of backgrounds, most commonly in management and organisational studies, organisational sociology, and gender studies, have expanded the complementary theoretical concepts of the ideal worker and gendered organisations with empirical work in light of transformations to the macroeconomic context. For example, Williams, Muller, and Kilanski (2012) explore how the gendered organisational logic originally described by Acker has been transformed in the “new economy,” where work is characterised by insecurity, teamwork, career maps, and networking rather than the typical Fordist structures of long-term stability and standardized ladders. In their study of geoscientists, they show that maintaining extensive professional networks is crucial for career development when career changes are expected. However, self-promotion remains especially difficult for women in male-dominated contexts, particularly when supervisory discretion enables gender bias in rewards. Neely (2020) uncovers similar dynamics in a qualitative study of hedge fund workers, where she argues that the neoliberal economy has rebranded the masculine ideal of work devotion into a purportedly gender-neutral ethos of passion and meritocracy, yet continues to disproportionately reward those with freedom from caregiving, access to professional networks, and the freedom to take risks. Neely finds that women and Black men report penalties when taking similar risks to white male colleagues, suggesting that worker norms continue to be predicated on ideals for whiteness and masculinity. In response to critiques, Acker (2012) extends her earlier theory through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1995), showing that gender, race, and class are interlocking systems of inequality reproduced through everyday organisational practices, what she calls “inequality regimes.”

Furthermore, researchers have explored how the proliferation of digital technologies and the digitalisation of jobs have reconfigured the ideal worker norm. In a study of the use of mobile email devices amongst knowledge professionals, Mazmanian, Orlikowski, and Yates (2013) find that while technologies facilitated greater levels of autonomy over the timing and location of work, they also intersected with professional norms to intensify the expectation of their availability, which consequently reduced their ability to disconnect from work. They describe this as the autonomy paradox. Similarly, Beckman and Mazmanian’s (2020)

ethnography of nine US families reveals how digital connectivity intensifies the pressure to embody the ideal worker, blurring work–life boundaries and reinforcing gendered expectations. Howcroft et al. (2025) find that the ideal worker themes of work prioritisation and presenteeism are adapted in digitalised workforces in ways that intrude on workers’ personal time and domestic space, working against gender equality. These studies emphasize the paradoxical trade-off created between greater control over one’s time via digital devices and the increased intrusion of work-related communication into personal time and space.

These findings align with sociomaterial perspectives (Orlikowski 2007) that view digital technologies as inseparable from their social and organisational context. While these studies often find that the introduction of digital technologies serves to amplify pre-existing expectations within an organisation, sociomaterial perspectives have also been used to argue that the same technology can be used in heterogeneous ways. In her ethnographic study of mobile email device use in a footwear manufacturer, Mazmanian (2013) illustrates how sociomaterial dynamics can account for variation in technology use even within the same organisation. Lawyers in the organisation developed homogeneous in-group norms for their mobile device use that equated professionalism with constant availability, leading to stress and resentment due to the expectation that all would use the device in the same way. Conversely, the sales force cultivated shared expectations of heterogeneous use, which assumed that colleagues would engage with their devices differently. Mazmanian argues that organisations can avoid the trap of constant connectivity by fostering collective acceptance of diverse communication practices rather than enforcing uniform norms of availability. In this way, sociomaterial approaches reveal that the impact of digital technologies on work norms depends less on their technical affordances than on the social expectations through which they are enacted.

Overall, researchers have developed Acker and William’s original insights to account for their limitations and contexts through a consideration of the intersectional, technological, and economic transformations of contemporary work. These works demonstrate the enduring relevance of the ideal worker and gendered organisation frameworks in understanding how inequality is continually reconfigured rather than eliminated. Yet the longevity of these frameworks might also indicate a level of conceptual inertia, which could require retheorisation or simply adaptation after the seismic shifts to the normative expectations of work during the pandemic. Throughout this thesis, I explore whether the ideal worker norm is ‘enough’ to conceptually describe the shifting expectations and experiences of hybrid work after the pandemic, finding that while presenteeism is amplified by always-on digital technologies, there is also evidence for emergent configurations of and norms about work-family roles which require updated conceptualisation.

From ideal worker to working from home: continuities and transformations to gendered work cultures

Flip to the ‘Conclusion’ or ‘Recommendations’ section of most sociological writing on the work-family axis, and you will find the recommendation that white-collar jobs embrace greater levels of flexibility. For instance, Williams (2001a) recommends redesigning workplace norms to support flexibility in order to facilitate shared caregiving, and Goldin (2021) suggests reducing the cost of flexibility – if “greedy jobs” paid less, there would be less incentive to take them. Technologically speaking, flexible work and working from home has been possible in white-collar occupations since digital technologies began to proliferate in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet while flexible work is technically possible, it has been culturally stigmatised. As argued by Williams et al. (2013), ideal worker cultures create a flexibility stigma that arises when employees who use flexible work arrangements such as remote work or adjusted hours are perceived as less dedicated, less competent, or morally lacking. This stigma varies by social class and gender: among elite professionals, flexibility stigma penalizes those who step back from long hours, whereas among low-wage precarious workers, it manifests as punishment for inflexibility. Men who request flexible hours for caregiving are often stigmatised for failing to fulfil hegemonic standards of masculinity (Rudman and Mescher 2013). On the other hand, women are culturally expected to prioritise family, but when they do, are seen as less serious professionals. Often, flexible work arrangements only exist for high-level managers who are trusted to conform to the ideal worker norm (Acker 2006).

The COVID-19 pandemic began to unsettle the normative expectation that knowledge work must take place in-person; one of the most transformative unexpected consequences of the pandemic was the rise and normalisation of working-from-home. While the number of workers with fully remote arrangements has decreased since pandemic restrictions were lifted, the number of workers with hybrid and remote work arrangements remains far higher than pre-pandemic numbers (Office for National Statistics 2024). In a survey of managers in the UK in 2022, Forbes et al. (2022) find a profound change in working norms compared to the pre-pandemic period, with managers expecting employees in the office less, and more likely to see flexible work as performance enhancing. They argue that these changes are reducing the flexibility stigma and tackling the UK’s presenteeist working culture, but warn that these shifts are fragile – particularly when based on informal agreements rather than employment contracts. This fragility is revealed by the recent proliferation of return to office mandates, which I explore in Chapter 6. UK employees themselves report that their productivity was not adversely affected by the shift to working from home, with 70% of employees saying that they are able to complete more work while working from home than prior to the pandemic (Felstead and Reuschke 2023). The UK government called for flexible working to be normalised in 2021, partially to improve gender equity in employment, and in 2023 approved the Flexible Working Act which granted employees the right to request flexible work from day one of employment (Brione 2023). All of this is evidence for the rapid normalisation of flexible work since the pandemic.

Yet despite these pandemic-induced shifts towards workplace flexibility, which arguably hold promise for enhancing women's participation in the labour market, there has been significant debate within the literature about the economic impact of the pandemic on women. Many studies chart the negative impact of working from home during lockdown on women, with scholars using the term "she-cession" to describe the pandemic's disproportionate impact on women (Bluedorn et al. 2023; Fabrizio, Gomes, and Tavares 2021). Several factors are thought to have caused the she-cession, including the higher burden of childcare shouldered by women amid the loss of previously utilised care networks, plus the greater impact of the pandemic on female-dominated sectors (Newson 2021). Research conducted by the UK government finds that 46% of mothers made redundant during the pandemic cite lack of adequate childcare as the cause, and 70% of women with caring responsibilities who requested furlough after school closures in 2021 were denied (Newson 2021). The she-cession, therefore, is at least partially related to the gender roles captured by Williams's concept of domesticity – the expectation that women be primarily responsible for caregiving. In the absence of broader networks of care and support, such as nurseries, schools, childminders, and extended families, the time bind for working women during the pandemic tightened, leading women to scale back participation in or exit the labour market completely.

However, as pointed out by Kim et al. (2022) the term "she-cession" is misleading because there is substantial variation within female groups. For example, they find that unmarried men in the US were more economically disadvantaged by the pandemic than married women with school age children. Furthermore, one UK study even found that more women – and mothers of young children in particular – were engaged in full-time employment during the pandemic than before the pandemic (Brewer, McCurdy, and Slaughter 2021). Yet within these numbers there is complexity: whilst more women overall joined the workforce in the UK since the onset of the pandemic than men, women with minority ethnic backgrounds were less likely to be employed than men from minority ethnic backgrounds (House of Commons Library 2022). The opposite is true for women from white ethnic backgrounds, who were more likely to be employed than men from white ethnic backgrounds. These intersecting inequalities align with Acker's (2012) conception of 'inequality regimes', illustrating how race, class, and gender interlock within organisational and national contexts, shaping who benefits from flexibility and who bears its risks. What these disparate findings suggest is that the effects of the pandemic and the shift to remote work on women were not homogenous, and that their mechanisms require further exploration.

Given that the negative impacts on women arose largely as a result of uneven domestic divisions of labour that were exacerbated by lockdown restrictions, these pandemic-based studies fall short of being able to account for the experience of women in the post-pandemic era of work, which features the normalisation of flexible working arrangements *and* the access to care networks – however patchy or incomplete they may be in the UK. More recent research shows early signs that the rise of work-from-home has reduced the motherhood

penalty in segments of the US market that are traditionally family *unfriendly*, like finance and marketing (Harrington and Kahn 2023). However, other research warns that flexible work could reinforce gendered inequalities if women use their flexible arrangements to absorb more unpaid caregiving work, and men use them to work longer hours (Chung 2020, 2022). Technology-enabled flexibility such as telework is often assumed to enhance employee control over work–life boundaries, but the review shows that this control is rarely measured and that outcomes depend heavily on how such policies are implemented (Kossek, Perrigino, and Lautsch 2022a). Both could be true simultaneously – middle-class mothers might be better able to access full-time employment while also engaging in more unpaid caregiving work than their flexible working male counterparts. It is at this point that my research intervenes to explore whether the ideal worker norm remains a useful concept to explain the mechanisms driving contemporary gendered inequality amongst professional women, or whether it no longer captures the digitalised flexible forms of work emerging in post-pandemic contexts. The following chapters explore this conceptual shift empirically. For example, in Chapter 5, I show evidence for emerging worker norms that allow for the integration of caregiving responsibilities with legitimate professional identities.

The Intensive Mother in the Digital Age

In this section, I engage with analysis of the ‘family’ side of the work-family axis. I draw on seminal works on the feminisation of caregiving and household responsibility, from Williams on domesticity (2001), Hays on intensive mothering (1996), and Hochschild and Machung on the second shift (1989/2012). I also explore more recent shifts in the literature, namely the shifting normative expectations for fathers (Dermott 2014; Faircloth 2023), the increased attention being paid to the cognitive dimension of household responsibility by scholars such as Daminger (2019) and Weeks and Ruppner (2024), and the role of digital technologies in care (Lim 2020). I explore what happened to divisions of domestic labour during the pandemic and how my research contributes to both these foundational and contemporary understandings of family and parenting, suggesting that my study offers a novel perspective that combines an insight into gendered cognitive labour with an analysis of the digital technologies that are used to manage both care and work.

Motherly devotion

Williams’ (2001) gendered model of domesticity provides a foundational framework for understanding how motherhood and care are organised under capitalism. She argues that ideal worker cultures are sustained by the invisible reproductive labour of women whose domestic and caregiving roles remain naturalised, invisible, and undervalued. She highlights how domesticity emerged in tandem with industrial capitalism, institutionalising the notion that the private, domestic sphere was a woman’s moral and emotional domain and responsibility – separate from the market and a site of selfless care. Within this bifurcated system, motherhood is framed as a key spiritual and moral experience, generative of meaning

and identity for women. Blair-Loy (2003) describes this as ‘the family devotion schema’. Crucially, under domesticity, the reproductive work that is coded as feminine, such as childrearing, ceases to be seen as work or as productive activity, and is instead reframed as an act of love. The feminisation of the private sphere renders ‘women’s work’ invisible and undervalued in relation to the masculinised, waged world of the public sphere.

At a similar time as key theories from Williams and Acker emerged to analyse the gendered structures of work, Hays (1996) published her now canonical study on the cultural norms and ideological underpinnings of motherhood. Hays (1996) analyses motherhood as a gendered and class-based identity project through her concept of intensive mothering, describing a dominant cultural model in the US in which women are expected to devote extraordinary time, energy, and emotion to their children’s wellbeing: intensive mothering is “child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays 1996: 9). Drawing on interviews with mothers and an analysis of contemporary and historical childrearing manuals, Hays argues that good mothers are characterised by their self-sacrificing maternal devotion to their children, where they prioritise their child’s needs above their own and above their spouse’s. Intensive motherhood holds the mother primarily responsible for childrearing and is based on the core beliefs that children need constant nurturing by their biological mothers, that mothers must spend time and money on their children, and that mothers must always hold their children and their schedules in their minds. This model of motherhood constructs children themselves as fragile and in need of constant investment.

Hays argues that the cultural authority of intensive mothering is sustained not only through moral ideology but through the co-option of scientific and psychological discourses. The growth of expert prescriptions around children’s health, attachment, and development psychologises motherhood, turning maternal care into a scientifically monitored project of optimisation. As an example, attachment theory is a theory drawn from developmental psychologists that posits that a child’s bond with their primary caregiver is the foundation for all emotional and social development in later life. Attachment theory was developed in the 1950s and became widely popularised in subsequent decades as providing the blueprint for fostering healthy development in children. The primary carer held responsible for this development is implicitly the mother. Feminists have critiqued the politicisation of ‘attachment theory’ as scientific justification for conservative gender roles that subtly critique working mothers, obscure the role of social and economic factors, and ignore the father’s role in child development (Duschinsky, Greco, and Solomon 2015). These discourses naturalise maternal devotion as a moral and scientific obligation, intensifying the surveillance and self-discipline expected of mothers.

Bad mothers are constructed as those who deviate from their devotion to their children, such as by delegating care, relying on paid caregivers, pursuing their own careers, or failing to provide sufficiently intensive attention to their children, thereby threatening their child’s

development into a healthy and successful adult. Working mothers therefore must navigate not only ideal worker norms that stigmatise their caregiving status, but also the gendered mothering norms that stigmatise their engagement with paid labour. This places mothers in a double bind where they are required to manage what Blair-Loy (2003) calls ‘competing devotions’. Hays finds that mothers who support their families economically will often internalise a deep sense of guilt for failing to uphold these dominant standards of availability and devotion, a dynamic I explore in Chapter 4, when Diana juggles working from home and devoting attention to her young child at the same time.

Like Williams’s work, Hays’s ideas propose a normatively constructed ‘ideal-type’ of moral motherhood that individual identities and experiences coalesce in relation to, which has given rise to numerous qualitative and ethnographic studies that explore how intensive mothering norms map across class, race, and national context (e.g. Bloch and Taylor 2014; Christopher 2012; Ennis 2014; Parker and Morrow 2017). For example, Collins (2021) conducted a cross-national comparison to find that a felt sense of guilt defined the ‘good mother’ identity across cultural contexts, but that public policy can reduce maternal guilt by promoting gender egalitarian divisions of labour in the home and workplace. Using a comparative case study of nativist websites based in the United States and a welfare office in rural North Carolina, USA, Bloch and Taylor (2014) find that while women with class and race privilege are expected to focus solely on their self-sacrificial roles as intensive mothers, mothers from marginalised backgrounds are instead viewed as making selfish, poor choices if they are not actively involved in paid labour.

Intensive mothering has been described as a middle-class project. Hays argues that middle-class mothers deploy intensive mothering as a strategy of class reproduction, using these practices to cultivate in their children the cultural capital and habitus of their class position. This also serves as a symbolic marker of moral and social distinction from working-class mothers who may lack access to such resources. Building on this, in her comparative ethnography of middle and working class families in the US, Lareau (2003) finds that middle class families engage in what she describes as ‘concerted cultivation’, or the enrolment of children in organised activities that dominate family life and generate enormous labour most often shouldered by mothers. These activities, such as soccer, piano lessons, language skills, help them to develop life skills – the cultural capital and habitus highlighted by Hays – creating a wide range of experiences for children but a frenetic pace for parents. Whereas families in the 19th century once may have gathered round the hearth, Lareau points out that the centre of the home for these contemporary frenetic families is the family calendar.

In contrast, Lareau finds that working class families engage in ‘natural growth’, based on the assumption that as families provide love, food, and safety, the child will naturally grow. This parenting culture is based on much fewer organised activities and instead is centred on deeper, richer ties with extended families. Yet in her interview study, Villalobos (2014) slightly complicates this class contrast by situating intensive motherhood within broader

conditions of neoliberal insecurity. She interviews mothers from diverse socioeconomic statuses, marital statuses, and ethnic backgrounds in the US, finding that their childrearing practices are oriented around creating a sense of economic security for one's children and oneself. Amid the increasing individualisation of risk in neoliberal capitalist societies, parents view themselves as solely responsible for children's safety and psychological wellbeing. As families feel increasingly under threat, they pin their hopes on the practices of intensive mothering. Consequently, Villalobos extends Lareau's findings by suggesting that in a context of precarity arising from neoliberal capitalism, intensive mothering becomes a moral and socioeconomic practice of managing insecurity that cuts across class status and transforms care into a site of individualised risk management.

Divisions of reproductive labour

While Hays and her successors expose the cultural and emotional demands of intensive motherhood, other scholars have turned to the empirical question of how these ideals translate into the material organization of household labour. The ideological gendered division of public paid labour and unpaid private caregiving has given rise to patterns of unequal household and caregiving labour that persist to the current day. The ideology of domesticity is not automatically resolved when women enter the workforce in large numbers. Instead, they add paid work on top of their domestic responsibilities, creating what Hochschild (2012) terms the "second shift." Hochschild argues that the lack of women holding senior positions in the workforce is precisely because men do not share in the raising of their children and the caring of their homes. Though Hochschild was conducting research in 1980s America, these patterns remain embedded in current day UK. Using time-use data, economists found that in the UK, women do on average 1 hour and 50 minutes more unpaid labour in the home than men (Andrew et al. 2024). It is this second shift that, alongside ideal worker cultures and greedy jobs, is widely accepted as one of the key drivers of the motherhood penalty and ongoing gender gaps in the labour market.

However, it is too simplistic to view childcare and housework as a monolithic category, as might be tempting when following the logic of Williams's concept of domesticity. This is because housework and childcare hold different normative and cultural meanings - housework is often viewed within sociological literature as drudgery, with the base assumption being that parents find childcare more enjoyable than housework, which is thus theorised as undesirable labour to be bargained away (Robinson and Godbey 1997). Treating housework as unpleasant work that both men and women attempt to minimize establishes housework as socially low-status and unfulfilling work (Bianchi et al. 2012). That women still do significantly more housework than men is representative of the continued association with women and the domestic sphere and reflects their persistent gendered disadvantage and unequal bargaining power within the household, which in turn shapes and is shaped by their ongoing unequal participation in paid labour. Moreover, housework and childcare are composed of a variety of tasks that take different times, energy, skills, and effort to complete.

The allocation of these tasks is another site for the production of gendered power relations. For example, Hochschild observes that feminine-coded tasks tend to be more urgent and repetitive, such as cooking, cleaning, or managing children's schedules, whereas masculine-coded tasks are typically occasional, such as household repairs.

As Williams (2001a) notes, as childcare is increasingly conceptualised as a key spiritual experience, fathers feel more pressure to participate in it, yet the types of participation remain uneven. Hochschild writes: "Women often juggle three spheres – jobs, children, housework – whilst most men juggle two – jobs and children" (p9). More recent research found that men have increased their time spent in childcare but not housework (Altintas and Sullivan 2017). Yet as Raley, Bianchi, and Wang (2012) demonstrate, childcare is internally differentiated along gendered lines: routine and managerial forms of childcare, such as feeding, cleaning, and managing schedules, are more likely to remain feminized, whereas interactive and recreational care like playing or going to the park is more common among fathers. Their study finds that even as fathers increase their participation in childcare, they tend to concentrate on the 'fun' or discretionary aspects, while mothers retain responsibility for the repetitive, less-desirable, and time-sensitive forms of care. Echoing the division of household labour, this asymmetry in the types of caregiving tasks that men and women do creates a greater temporal and emotional burden on women and reinforces their status as primary caregiver, even as men participate more in childrearing. Therefore, the allocation of types of household and caregiving tasks, and how they are completed in practice, reproduces gendered hierarchies of time, value, and labour, sustaining the unequal distribution of care within families and limiting women's opportunities for career advancement.

However, evidence published in 2025 from the US has found that the gender gap in routine and menial housework, such as cleaning, laundry, and cooking, has narrowed (Milkie et al. 2025). The authors also found that shopping became almost gender-neutral, and that the childcare gap decreased slightly. They argue that women's reduced housework time is due to the increased likelihood of their labour market participation, and that men's increased participation in traditionally 'feminine' domestic activities reflects a normative change, noting that the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily boosted men's involvement in domestic work. In the UK, Chung et al. (2021) find that while mothers still did most unpaid work, gender inequality in domestic divisions of labour slightly narrowed during lockdown. Fathers who worked from home were more likely to increase their share of housework and childcare, particularly in routine childcare and homeschooling. This could suggest that when workers are given more autonomy to shape their working hours around domestic life, that some men may increase their participation in unpaid domestic labour.

However, both studies point out that while these small gains are visible, mothers still shoulder the lion's share of unpaid labour in the home, with Milkie et al (2025) finding that women perform nearly twice as much unpaid labour as men overall. Chung et al (2021) found that mothers often shouldered additional burdens when compared to their male counterparts,

leading to multitasking stress and reduced working capacity. It appears that while gender-egalitarianism when it comes to housework is increasingly more socially desirable, particularly among the middle class, it has not yet translated to substantial changes in the material division of labour. A survey from the UK's National Centre for Social Research found that while attitudes increasingly support the egalitarian division of household chores, women continue to do more domestic labour than men: while 76% of people surveyed felt that the washing and ironing should be shared equally, 65% also reported that this is mainly done by women in their household (Clery et al. 2021). These empirical findings highlight a complex intersection of shifting and embedded gender norms that continue to shape the way heterosexual couples navigate the management of work and care.

Despite the limits of these shifts in gendered divisions of labour, it is worth highlighting the link between an increase in men's participation in the domestic sphere and shifting norms around masculinity and fatherhood. As suggested by Milkie et al.'s (2025) findings, the cultural expectations of what constitutes a 'good' father have shifted beyond a purely breadwinning role. While the exact features of this new fatherhood remain fuzzy, it is generally accepted that involved fathers aim to be physically accessible or present with their children, to have regular involvement in their care such as by feeding them, bathing them, or playing with them, and to take responsibility for their child's welfare (Kaufman 2013; Norman 2017). The empirical work on divisions of household labour cited above also may indicate that these shifts in fatherhood slowly bleed into their overall involvement in the unpaid labour in the home. Indeed, amongst the participants in this study, many men framed their participation in domestic labour as "being a good partner" to their female spouse.

In the UK, policy measures have been instituted to encourage fathers' direct involvement in family life, such as programmes which encourage fathers to read with their children (Faircloth 2023). Yet though involved fathers are expected to be equal partners in parenting, nurturing children, and performing physical caregiving tasks, these expectations often conflict with enduring ideal worker norms and greedy jobs that continue to position men as the main breadwinner of the home (Atkinson 2022; McGill 2014). For example, Atkinson finds that men who adopt Shared Parental Leave often take a cautious approach that allows them to maintain their commitment to being involved parents and still conform to the ideal worker norms by adjusting the timing and length of their leave to mitigate any potential career penalties. These cautious negotiations reveal the complex persistence of traditional masculine norms and the potential for new models of fatherhood to gradually reshape them. On the other hand, Atkinson also finds evidence that some fathers take a 'bolder' approach, exhibiting less concern about accommodating their employer's needs and adjusting their working hours for childcare. This bold rejection of the ideal worker norm is often in part facilitated by the presence of a more supportive workplace culture, pointing to the continued importance of meso-level organisational norms in the division of household labour – a dynamic I explore in relation to hybrid working models in Chapter 5.

Cognitive labour, emotional labour, and the mental load

However, one element of gendered domestic labour remains relatively unchanged amid the shifting norms around masculinity and narrowing gaps in physical housework: the cognitive or “mental load” of managing household life, which some have described as the ‘third shift’ (Krstić et al. 2025). In an influential article, Daminger (2019) defined this cognitive work as the labour of (1) anticipating needs; (2) identifying options for meeting those needs; (3) deciding among the options; and (4) monitoring the results. This cognitive work is typically framed as invisible within the literature, taking place ‘within the heads’ of those responsible for it, and can be done concurrently to other tasks such as physical housework e.g. cooking or paid labour. Daminger (2025) builds on this definition in later work, drawing a comparison between time-use and mind-use. She argues that unequal divisions of cognitive labour cannot be adequately captured by traditional time-use measurement studies that measure the minutes or hours spent on housework or caregiving. Because cognitive labour is continuous, diffuse, and thus unquantifiable, it often remains analytically obscured in time-use studies. Consequently, sociological analyses of gendered divisions of labour must move beyond time-use measures to include an assessment of mind-use. This framing becomes particularly pertinent in the present study, where flexible working arrangements begin to alleviate aspects of the gendered time bind, but do not necessarily reduce the unequal division of mind-use.

Cognitive labour is gendered, even in couples who self-identify as gender egalitarian (Petts, Carlson, and Wong 2025). The element of cognitive labour that appears most evenly split between genders is the work of deciding amongst the options. As Daminger (2019) notes, decision-making is the most closely associated with power and influence, because participating in the decision-making process is the best way to advocate for one’s preferred outcome. Conversely, women are more closely aligned with cognitive labour tasks that are “the most invisible, abstract, and distant from power” (ibid: 62). A similar concept, invisible work, refers to labour that is not only literally invisible but also socially unacknowledged (Hochschild 2012). Cognitive labour and its gendered allocation can therefore be considered a site for the expression of power relations within the couple and in the home, reflective of continued gender inequalities.

Recent research shows that while men have increased their participation in visible household and caregiving tasks, the invisible labour of planning, coordinating, and monitoring family needs remains disproportionately borne by women (Weeks, Kowalewska, and Ruppner 2025). Weeks, Kowalewska, and Ruppner (2025) term this persistence “gendered cognitive stickiness” – the tendency for cognitive tasks to adhere to mothers even when they work full-time or out-earn their partners, and even when physical domestic work divisions narrow. Their research finds that employment and income reduces women’s physical domestic work, but not their cognitive responsibilities, whereas men’s cognitive labour responds to changes in time and resources. High income men are more likely to have the resources to outsource physical labour, while their likely increased job autonomy facilitates their participation in

childcare planning. Overall, they argue that because this mental work is ongoing, internal, and difficult to delegate, it resists redistribution through negotiation or outsourcing. This finding suggests that despite evolving ideals of involved fatherhood and the gradual erosion of traditional divisions of physical housework, the unequal mental management of domestic life remains a hidden barrier to gender equality.

Furthermore, Helgøy and Weeks (2025) find that when women take on high levels of cognitive labour, their intentions to engage in workplace activities related to career advancement are significantly reduced. They also demonstrate a preference for the reduction of working hours, presumably to reduce the sense of being cognitively “crowded out”. Therefore, the ongoing uneven division of cognitive labour has far-reaching impacts on women’s participation in the labour market, even as their male partners take on more physical housework and childcare. Similarly, Aviv et al. (2025) find that cognitive labour is associated with women’s depression, stress, burnout, overall mental health, and relationship functioning. Together, these studies offer evidence for how the uneven division of cognitive labour can have ongoing detrimental impacts on women’s participation in the labour market and on their subjective mental states.

Daminger is careful to distinguish cognitive labour from emotional labour. Emotional labour refers to the work that goes into managing one’s own or another’s feeling and affect (Hochschild 1979) – Daminger notes that cognitive labour and emotional labour may be simultaneous, but differ in purpose. Whereas cognitive labour might involve remembering that a child has a school trip the next day and packing their lunch accordingly, the emotional component involves making sure that the child feels excited and reassured, perhaps by packing a favourite snack. This careful distinction may point to some preexisting conceptual ambiguity, with scholars historically often using cognitive labour, mental labour, and emotional labour somewhat interchangeably, causing a degree of slippage that can at times complicate its application. For example, in Helgøy and Weeks’s (2025) paper, they define the mental load as cognitive household labour, but elsewhere these are defined as two analytically distinct concepts. I suggest that these inconsistencies are partly to do with the fact that emotional and cognitive labour are often layered, as in the above example. As Hay’s originally argued, in their roles as intensive mothers, women are expected to keep their child’s wellbeing and development as a priority, which means that planning for and anticipating their child’s needs often also requires a consideration of their child’s emotional or mental state.

In their work on the mental load, Dean, Churchill, and Ruppanner (2022) make a compelling case for the notion that it is the simultaneous management of cognitive and emotional labour that generates an overwhelming mental load for women, where women not only make lists and routines for their children but worry about the experiences of their children in these routines. This worrying is distinctly gendered and not purely individual; as Hays highlights, women tend to be held responsible for any negative outcomes in regard to their children. In

other words, women may worry more than their male partners about the wellbeing of their children because, socially, they are held primarily responsible for the outcomes of their children. A woman who forgets to pack her child's lunchbox for a school trip may be evaluated as a "bad" mother or not caring enough about her child. This resonates with Offer's study (2014), which finds that mothers and fathers were equally likely to engage in family-related mental labour, but that this labour was only emotionally detrimental to women. By way of explanation, Offer suggests that despite fathers' increased involvement in the home, women continue to be positioned as the bearers of moral responsibility for the quality of family life and wellbeing of children – worrying is a way for women to express moral responsibility and gain social acceptability. Taken together, these works offer a rich analytical lens to understanding why invisible domestic labour feels so exhausting and overwhelming for women, and also highlights how cognitive labour in the home rarely exists without an emotional component.

Taking this recent and classical work in synthesis, I posit that intensive motherhood persists in new forms: the good mother cares through remembering, anticipating, and monitoring, even as she engages in full-time employment; the good father is present, physically available, and emotionally attuned, yet because of this is increasingly at risk of being co-opted into the work-family bind previously reserved for working mothers. Much of the literature on cognitive labour has revolved around developing novel ways to measure this invisible and intangible mental work that resists traditional time-use measures (Weeks et al. 2025; Weeks and Ruppner 2024), and unpacking the gender strategies that underlie the continued unequal division of cognitive labour amongst purportedly egalitarian, middle-class, dual earner couples (Daming 2019). Perhaps due to its definition as invisible labour held in the heads of women, less time or attention has been spent on *how* the mental load looks and works in practice.

My research intervenes at this moment and highlights a crucial material component often missing in contemporary feminist perspectives on the mental load: digital technology. Lim (2020) uses the term transcendent parenting to describe how digital communication technologies enable parents to remain constantly connected to their children. Even when children attend schools or daycare, institutions can continue to update or seek assistance from parents throughout the day. For example, one of my participants told me that her child's nursery uses an app to send her (rather than her partner) photos of her child throughout the day. While she enjoyed receiving photos of her daughter, these notifications often interrupted the flow of her working day. Transcendent parenting introduces an 'always-on' quality to caregiving. Much like the autonomy paradox described by Mazmanian et al. (2013), while technologies facilitate mobile communication and coordination, they intensify the pressure on caregivers. This pressure is experienced disproportionately by women (Hu and Qian 2024), perhaps due to the "gendered cognitive stickiness" expectation that they remain responsible for managing the care of children, and the ongoing identification women experience with the intensive mothering norm. As Beckman and Mazmanian (2020) write: "although technology

allows people to do more, it also makes it more difficult for them to keep up. It creates a spiral of expectations” (p111). In their study, they find that technology enables busy families to maintain their social networks of support – what they describe as ‘scaffolding’ – while also linking people into systems of expectations that intensify demands on time.

While there is a significant subset of literature that focuses on parenting practices in an increasingly digitalised society (e.g. Lim 2020, Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2020), these works rarely explicitly intersect with research on cognitive labour, emotional work, and the mental load, even though many implicitly describe how digital technologies intensify the cognitive and emotional demands of care by facilitating ‘always-on’ parenting. One notable exception is Peng (2022)’s research on gendered digital labour amongst heterosexual parents in China, which finds that digital technologies do not change gender imbalances but instead reinforce the status quo in which mothers do most of the cognitive, digital parenting labour. Moreover, few studies consider parents’ concurrent use of technology for paid labour, or how their digital parenting practices co-exist within a polymedia landscape of competing digital work practices. Instead, the literature on digital parenting tends to base its analysis firmly within the ‘family’ half of the work-family axis. Conversely, the literature on sociomateriality emerged out of organisational studies and most often has been applied to analyses of technology adoption within organisations, thus lending itself more naturally to the ‘work’ side of the work-family axis. My study brings these two theoretical and empirical spheres together to understand the family and working lives of hybrid working parents in a holistic sense to understand how the enduring and transforming norms around parenting, gender, and work are configured within contemporary sociomaterial formations.

Research Statement

Analysing the work-family axis is well-trodden ground and, throughout this thesis, I walk in the footsteps of giants. Influential figures such as Hochschild, Williams, Acker, and Hays, plus more recent contributors like Goldin, Daminger, Weeks, and Ruppanner have each illuminated the persistence and transformation of gendered inequalities across the workplace and the home. Empirical work during and after the pandemic has pointed to complex and, at times, contradictory gendered trends, with evidence to suggest that the gendered divisions of labour in the home were both deepened and transformed during this time. While some research suggests that divisions of routine childcare and physical housework have narrowed, other research finds that the cognitive dimension of domestic labour remains unchanged. Furthermore, empirical research on women’s participation in the labour market after the pandemic suggests that the trend towards flexible work has enabled more women to engage in traditionally ‘un-family friendly’ occupations such as finance. It remains to be seen how the changes to the expectations of work interact with the disproportionate mental load experienced by women.

Building on this legacy, my project turns to the post-pandemic context of hybrid work to ask how gender norms shape experiences of flexibility and responsibility in the everyday lives of hybrid working parents in the UK. Vice versa, I explore how the digitalised conditions of flexibility might allow for the reconfiguration or the reproduction of gendered behaviours in the daily lives of working parents. Through this focus, this project brings together diverse yet connected strands of scholarship on ideal worker norms and intensive parenting norms to ask: what happens to the work-family axis when the ideal worker norm encounters the practices of flexibility? Do the emergent practices and expectations of hybrid work necessitate updated conceptualisation to better describe contemporary gendered dynamics in the home and the workplace? While the literature explains how digitalisation intensifies the ideal worker norm and how cognitive labour sustains gendered inequality, these strands remain analytically separate. This study brings them together under the conditions of hybrid work.

Beyond this focus on ‘updating’ the work-family literature, I turn to the material and digital organising infrastructures of work and care to explore how gender norms themselves are sociomaterially constituted. While the challenges posed to boundary-management by digitalised, always-on technologies have mostly been explored in the context of paid work (Chung 2022; Ollier-Malaterre, Jacobs, and Rothbard 2019), they have similar repercussions in the context of unpaid caregiving and domestic work. Throughout this review, I have paid attention to relevant scholarship on digitalisation, such as work from Howcroft et al (2024) on how digital work practices extend the ideal worker norm, and Lim (2020) on how digital technologies facilitate an expectation of always-on style caregiving. As is clear from sociomaterial analyses from Orlikowski (2004), Orlikowski and Scott (2014), and Mazmanian (2013), digital technologies are always “in-practice”, bound up within socially specific norms and historical contexts. Acknowledging that technology is not simply a neutral background, this thesis explores how the shifting arrangements of work that are enabled, but not driven, by digital communication technologies map on to the experiences of heterosexual men and women with children in the post-pandemic landscape of the UK.

Introducing Coordinative Labour

Why is a new concept required?

Existing work on cognitive, emotional, and mental labour demonstrates women’s disproportionate responsibility for domestic planning yet tends to treat these forms of labour as immaterial, as primarily mental or emotional processes, and as situated solely within the domestic sphere. As discussed above, hybrid work normalises blurred work–care boundaries, but less attention has been paid within the work-family scholarship to the specific digitalised practices through which work and care blur when working from home. Furthermore, flexible work is frequently cited as a potential mechanism to reduce the work-family conflict that limits women’s entry to and progression in the labour market. For example, Wong (2023) states that better remote work options could allow heterosexual couples to prioritise both

careers, rather than prioritising the male partner's career through relocation. However, Chung's (2020) work shows that flexible work can re-embed gender inequalities and lead to over-work.

What I propose is a concept that precisely captures the labour required to sustain family life with hybrid working arrangements that traverses work and care. Building on the current literature, I introduce the concept of coordinative labour. Coordinative labour paradoxically underpins a more equal participation in the labour market and routine caregiving while also producing gendered forms of strain and overload. I provide its definition here to orient the reader to the analytical framework I will further develop and provide evidence for in the empirical chapters.

What is coordinative labour?

Coordinative labour refers to the work of organising and aligning care and paid work across time and space. It builds on existing analyses of cognitive labour that focus on domestic processes, such as maintaining the family calendar or managing family logistics e.g. planning children's medical appointments, researching options for items children need such as school supplies, or cleaning out children's clothes that no longer fit (Weeks and Ruppner 2024). Coordinative labour captures the work involved in aligning and intersecting the movements and schedules of children, a spouse, and other extended family members involved in regular family care (e.g. grandparents or siblings) with the individualised and highly flexible working schedules of parents in full-time employment.

Coordination thus involves two interlocking elements: the temporal and the spatial:

1. Temporal coordination, involving the alignment of fragmented, asynchronous schedules across household members and workplaces.
2. Spatial coordination, involving the organisation of the location and movement of household members across multiple sites of work and care, such as coordinating school drop-offs and pick-ups, office attendance, and ensuring work and care responsibilities are met.

Coordinative labour always involves emotional labour as well as cognitive labour, because the organisation of childcare involves not only cognitive planning but a responsibility for how children might feel or emotionally respond to care arrangements. In this sense, coordinative labour can be understood as a specific form of the mental load as theorised by Dean, Churchill, and Ruppner (2022). However, this thesis also builds on existing accounts of the mental load by focusing on the sociomaterial and cross-domain coordination required to align paid work and care under hybrid working conditions.

Why do hybrid working models generate the need for coordinative labour?

The widespread access to hybrid working models fundamentally transforms the boundaries between paid work and home life. Digitalisation erodes the work/care separation by enabling work to be performed across locations and outside of standard working hours. As a result, working days fragment and extend, and care responsibilities are frequently fulfilled during the working day. As I show in this thesis, the expectation since the COVID-19 pandemic that paid work *can* and *should* be more flexible is increasingly normatively embedded. Amongst the hybrid workers in this study, the organisation of work and care is no longer episodic or segmented. Instead, the leakiness of boundaries is normalised by the simultaneous presence of work and care within the same site and moment.

The normalisation of digitalised flexible working time and location creates new opportunities for both parents to be more engaged in the care of children while maintaining full-time careers. Mothers have historically been the ones in dual-earning different sex couples to scale back their working hours or adapt their working schedule to meet family demands (Gerson 2011; House of Commons Library 2022). The greater autonomy found in hybrid models begins to address the “time-bind” that women are placed in by the expectations of greedy jobs and families, by enabling the flexible management of work around caregiving responsibilities. This dual engagement in work and care is sustained through the synchronisation, alignment, and coordination of work with care, of care around work, and work around care: coordinative labour. In line with enduring intensive mothering norms that socialise mothers into the role of household manager (Dean et al. 2022; Hays 1996), the responsibility for this coordination is very often gendered.

While Chapters 4, 5, and 6 provide an extensive empirical foundation for the development of coordinative labour, a brief, common example within the sample is the mother who organises her children’s school pick-ups in the afternoon. This organisation requires the management of her own working schedule, in which she may be working in the office or at home. The expectation of increased flexibility in both her and her partner’s working schedules means that they can “mix and match” their office and home days with days they must interrupt their work to pick up their children from school, so she may also be coordinating with her partner, and managing how his schedule intersects with care. Any gaps are supplemented with help from extended family or paid-for afterschool care, so further coordination may occur with her child’s grandparents or other members of her extended family

In this example, hybrid working fathers can shoulder more day-to-day routine care than if they were working full time in the office, and mothers can avoid scaling back their working hours by flexibly managing rigid childcare schedules. Both parents feel able to spend more quality time with children. This is how hybrid work can both improve the access to the labour market for mothers while also generating extra labour which, as I shall show throughout the thesis, in turn produces emotional strain for working women and primary caregivers, such as guilt, shame, or stress. On the other hand, my thesis finds that some couples take a more

collaborative approach to coordinative labour, which can reduce the experience of a load for women.

How does coordinative labour happen? The role of technology

Coordinative labour is predominantly enacted via digitalised communication systems and platforms, such as messaging apps and collaborative digital calendars, that allow parents to manage and coordinate work and care obligations. I find that unlike the previous immaterial or mental conceptualisations of cognitive labour or the mental load, coordinative labour must be considered as a sociomaterial practice (Orlikowski and Scott 2008) because its form is constituted through interactions between people and the affordances of technologies. In Dean et al's (2022) theorization of the mental load, they give the example of the mother who is at work but also making mental lists of children's daily activities and worrying about their child's experience in these activities. Coordinative labour is the next step: not only making mental lists but doing the often-digitalised work of coordinating care and work. Rather than only worrying about the experience of children whilst at work, hybrid workers often actively organise pick-ups, negotiate schedule changes, message partners or carers, update calendars, and anticipate contingencies during their working day.

The digital infrastructures of hybrid work actively shape how coordinative labour is done by collapsing spatial boundaries across work and care, creating the conditions for the simultaneous fulfilment and management of work and caregiving roles in the same space, the same moment, and even on the same device. Hybrid workers operate in a domain characterised by increasingly leaky boundaries between work and care, where acts of care and work can occur simultaneously, mediated by a ubiquitous digital environment of notifications and communication channels to the employer, the family, and their broader network, including the school or nursery, no matter their physical location. The affordances of digital infrastructures used for work communications give parents greater control over the visibility of their caregiving responsibilities while working from home. For instance, the parent responsible for her child's school pick-up may choose to explicitly label this time in her calendar or simply block out the time as 'Unavailable'. In this way, the affordances of digital platforms used for the management of work and care provide the medium through which individuals navigate and manage professional visibility pressures and stigma that stems from ideal worker norms (Williams 2001).

These dynamics make coordinative labour inseparable from the platforms and devices through which it is enacted. But crucially, as later chapters show, it is not the presence of these technologies alone, but the gendered norms governing professional and domestic responsibility, visibility, and care that determine how coordinative labour is divided and experienced.

The outcome

While coordinative labour describes how mothers sustain paid work and caregiving simultaneously under hybrid working arrangements, it also produces significant emotional outcomes that are often gendered in nature. Digitalised boundary collapse produces temporal density and role strain, as multiple responsibilities can and must be managed simultaneously, rather than sequentially. Negative emotions arise out of the struggle to meet the normative expectations attached to the roles of ideal worker (Williams 2001) and intensive mother (Hays 1996), during moments when the expectations for these roles temporally and spatially collide and vie for an individual's attention. This is a form of strain-based work-family conflict in which the expectations of one role undermine the individual's ability to meet or feel that they can meet the normative expectations of another, despite the improvement of time-based role conflict – the time bind (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). Throughout this thesis, I highlight how moments of coordination are often accompanied with negative social emotion that particularly impacts women – stress, guilt, and shame. In turn, this demonstrates how despite purportedly egalitarian values in couples, women continue to be normatively and structurally positioned as the primary caregiver in hybrid working couples.

Coordinative labour offers a conceptual lens for understanding why hybrid work both expands and constrains gender equality. This concept provides the analytical foundation for the empirical chapters that follow, which explore how coordinative labour is performed and enacted within households, workplaces, and the broader policy landscape.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline and critically examine my research methodology. I begin by explaining the epistemological underpinnings to the research and gaps in the current literature that motivated my choice for certain qualitative methodologies. Then, I discuss my sampling choices before reviewing the interview and diary study elements of this research in more detail. Finally, I discuss my approach to analysis and engage in a consideration of reflexivity and positionality.

Research Questions

4. Why do parents in the UK tech sector and other knowledge economy sectors engage in hybrid work?
5. How has the increased prevalence of hybrid working arrangements shaped the experience of work for women in the tech sector and other knowledge economy sectors, compared with men?
6. What insights can a mixed-modal qualitative study on hybrid working practices generate about the contemporary relationship between gender and workplace norms in the UK?

Why Qualitative Methods?

There are many quantitative studies on the topic of working from home, work-life balance, and gender inequality during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Bluedorn et al. 2023; Chung et al. 2021; Collins et al. 2021; Kim et al. 2022; Xue and McMunn 2021). Though vital, these studies can only guess at the reasons for the dynamics they measure or the shifts to the gendered organisation of the labour market and the domestic sphere that have taken place since lockdown conditions were lifted. Fine-grained qualitative approaches that provide deeper insights on workers' lived experiences when working from home are currently underrepresented in the literature (Bissell et al. 2025). This leaves scope for research that uncovers the relational dimensions of contemporary post-pandemic working patterns and the mechanisms that drive them – a gap that this thesis aims to fill. Using multi-modal qualitative techniques, this research examines how hybrid-working women and men experience and organise working from home and raising young children to gain an insight into the gendered structural and normative expectations in the workplace and in the family that shape and constrain their choices.

This research began with the assumption that the acceleration of hybrid working does not inherently transform the gendered norms of work and motherhood that underpin gender inequality in the workplace. Instead, it requires closer examination of the everyday experiences of women and men following a hybrid model. It is the specific ways in which

hybrid working is arranged and implemented, both within the home and by employers, that can reveal whether gendered divisions of paid and unpaid labour are shifting, being reconfigured, or becoming further entrenched. By exploring hybrid work through the perspective of the workers themselves, this study seeks to understand how these increasingly prevalent arrangements, enabled by technology, may contribute to the reconfiguration of gendered social dynamics. Accordingly, my research employs a methodology concerned not with measuring ‘how much’, but with asking ‘how’ and ‘why’.

Researching the Everyday

At 06:30am, a woman sits in bed, yawning, checking her email on her phone while her husband prepares breakfast for their three school-aged children – it is his turn to take care of breakfast this morning.

A man closes his laptop and picks up his iPhone as he leaves his desk at home to pick up his children from school. Before leaving, he notices a message on Slack from his colleague requesting a quick chat. In the car, he calls her, and they discuss an upcoming client meeting.

A woman sits at her kitchen table, surrounded by the mess of daily life, ordering children’s clothes on the second-hand clothing app Vinted. As she scrolls through the app, messages from the school Mum’s WhatsApp group appear in banners at the top of the screen, reminding her that this week it is World Book Day, and that her children must come to school in a costume of their favourite fictional character.

Whilst working from home, a man receives a text from his wife asking if he wants tea. Though they are in the same home, she texts to avoid waking their sleeping baby. He enters the kitchen, and they sit and plan their upcoming week, merging their schedules and making time for family time, solo time, and work.

This research brings together interviews where participants reflect on their histories, their current lives, and the daily choices they make, with diary study data that asks them to make visible the invisible and mundane practices and processes of daily life. Rather than asking participants to reflect on an extraordinary moment in their lives, my approach takes the ‘ordinary’ seriously, as a product and producer of larger social forces and the domain of both normative behaviours and resistance (Neal and Murji 2015). These micro moments, emotions, and relations converge with the social factors, structures, technologies, and divisions that frame them. As put by Neal and Murji (2015), everyday sites and materialities are “not straightforwardly evidence, enactment, or manifestations of class, race, migration, gender, climates; these are not simply the optics for seeing the macro – they *are* social orderings, resistances, divisions, stratifications.” (p814). It is in these quotidian moments that I search for the gendered normative beliefs, structures, and behaviours that come to bear on the experiences of women and men who hybrid work.

Data Collection

Data collection of the everyday was organised into two, overlapping phases: an interview phase and a diary study phase. Throughout data collection, I adopted an abductive and iterative epistemology (Agar 2006; Small 2009) that moved between data collection and theory to refine and develop my explanations for what I observed in the data.

Phase 1: Interviews

Interviews enable the researcher to access information that may be difficult or impossible to gather in other ways, such as social and mental processes that are unobservable, differences in the way people experience and interpret events, dynamic processes developing over time, hidden or poorly understood social patterns, and insight into the inner life of the individual (Gerson and Damaske 2020). The interviews I conducted form the vital backbone of my study and contributed towards the theoretical direction of the subsequent phases of my research, allowing me to build an understanding of the experience of hybrid work for workers from the ground up.

During interviews, I asked questions about the daily routines and rhythms of life that often led interviewees to express surprise or amusement – “Really? How much detail shall I go into? Do you want me to keep going?” Once I had established these mundane, micro details of life – or, at least, the way they were described by the interviewee – I followed up with nested questions (Gerson and Damaske 2020). For example, when talking about the daily school run, I might ask: why do you organise it that way? Has it always been that way? Has hybrid work influenced the way you organise it? How? In an ideal world, how would it be? What emerged from these interviews was that while hybrid work allowed both men and women to be more present with their children and to share routine care and domestic tasks, women described a more cognitively overloaded and emotionally complex experience than their male counterparts.

Phase 2: Diary Studies

The hybrid lives of my participants unfold across layered and juxtaposed sites. The workplace, both in-person and digital, the domestic sphere, and all the places in-between constitute the essential material, digital, and social environment of the hybrid worker. I used a digital diary method to follow participants as they navigated through their roles as colleagues, managers, workers, mothers, and spouses. The diaries invited a form of immediacy and intimacy, contributing to an understanding about the practices used by participants to manage work and family and how participants made sense of the events that they experienced. Participants could record entries immediately after the morning rush or a frustrating work meeting, offering glimpses into the affective dimensions of hybrid life that might otherwise remain inaccessible in an observational study or an interview-based study. The multi-modal

capacities of the diaries allowed participants to easily share screenshots of their family and work calendars which opened a window into the entanglement of family organisation with digital tools. In this way, the diaries enhanced the insights gained from interviews by adding fine-grained detail and data on the daily lives, habits, and internal processes of my research participants. Due to granular nature of the narratives collected, diary studies enable the ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) I provide in subsequent empirical chapters.

Sampling Strategy

Overview

In this section, I define my sample and explain the theoretical motivations for why I chose to explore my research questions through these categories. I also explain how these categories evolved over the course of data collection to be more expansive than originally planned for, both to answer questions and concerns that emerged through this inductive process and to circumvent barriers encountered.

During the planning stages of this study, I set out specific inclusion criteria (see Table 1) for my interviews. The sample for my subsequent diary study would be selected from my interviewee sample. I was inspired by Gerson and Damaske's (2020) approach to theoretical sampling, which acknowledges that, because it is never possible to interview every single person who might be able to provide relevant information, the qualitative, interview-based study must carefully define the criteria by which to select interviewees. Theoretical sampling builds on similar approaches, such as Small's (2009) inferential logic and Creswell's (2015) purposive sampling, and involves defining a sample of relevant participants that is capable of yielding “theoretically generalizable insights” (Gerson and Damaske 2020: 46) rather than statistical representativeness. The objective of theoretical sampling is to find a variety of research participants who will shed light on the behaviours, rationales, dynamics, and mechanisms relevant to the core research questions, rather than a sample representative of the entire population.

Interviewee inclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An equal number of men and women.• Must have at least one child between 0-3-years-old⁶.• Must be in a heterosexual dual-earning couple.• Must be in full-time employment (no part-time salaried workers).• Must be employed within the tech sector.• Must have a hybrid working arrangement (some work tasks completed remotely,

⁶ After some discussion with my examiners during my Transfer of Status assessment, I decided to increase the age of the children to up to 11-years-old, to improve my chances of finding interviewees whilst still retaining the original logic of speaking with parents of young, dependent children.

some work tasks completed in the office).

Table 1. Interviewee inclusion criteria.

The tech sector

Originally, I narrowed my criteria to people with full-time, professional roles in the tech sector. The tech sector is defined as “e-commerce/e-business (the trading of goods or services over computer networks such as the internet [or] supporting infrastructure (that is, hardware, software, telecoms)” (ONS 2015). I use the term the tech sector rather than the IT sector as it encompasses a greater amount of tech-related roles, such as Internet and platform related companies, whilst the IT sector generally only refers to the supporting infrastructure. I chose to focus on a single sector to allow for depth over breadth, enabling a deep dive into its distinctive organisational cultures and gender dynamics. Yet as I will explore, my sample criteria became fuzzier than originally intended over the course of the research, leading me to define my sample as tech workers *and* other knowledge economy workers.

I chose the tech sector as the occupation from which to recruit my interviewees because professional roles within the tech sector are more likely to be completed remotely than in other industries or occupations, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic (Adams-Prassl et al. 2020). Since the end of the pandemic, ONS data shows that hybrid working is more common in the UK’s IT industry, with 49% of its workers following the hybrid model, closely followed by the professional, scientific, and technical activities industry at 42% (Office for National Statistics 2024). Though only 12% of UK workers worked from home before the pandemic, some participants in small tech companies reported remote working arrangements that were established long before the country went into lockdown. This was for several reasons, such as the international spread of their colleagues and clients, the amenability of the type of tasks they were responsible for to remote work, and the high cost of office property.

Hybrid, flexible, and remote work is thus more embedded organisationally and structurally in the management practices in the tech sector. For example, agile management practices are prevalent in tech, and harness technology to collaborate on project work without the traditional limitations of where and when tasks should be performed (Rigby, Sutherland, and Noble 2018). Furthermore, interviewees valued working in tech because they valued working at the ‘cutting edge’ in an innovative workplace that was not only developing or selling state-of-the-art products (often, with a social mission or impact) but also espoused progressive egalitarian workplace ideals such as a flexible working policy, as opposed to what many interviewees called “old school” industries such as banking or law, which were associated with traditional presenteeist masculinised working cultures. On the other hand, tech is a male-dominated sector: 29% of UK tech employees are women or non-binary, 21%

of senior tech role holders are women, and 1 in 3 women are planning to leave their tech job for a non-tech job (Tech Talent Charter 2024)⁷.

When designing this study in 2022-3, I expected that the combination of the UK tech skills shortage (Morrison 2023) and the government-backed desire to grow the UK tech sector would result in shifting power dynamics between the employer and the employee – in the employees’ favour. Yet since then, and despite the sector’s amenability to hybrid models of work, Big Tech companies such as Amazon, Apple, Google, and Meta began to issue return to office (RTO) mandates that required employees to resume working from physical office spaces (Christian 2023; Ford and Cook 2025). I explore these trends in Chapter 6.

Women and men

My research began with a question about how the shift to hybrid working arrangements after the COVID-19 pandemic mapped onto and shaped the experience of women with caring responsibilities. I use this focus to open a window onto the persistent and evolving gender norms that structure the experience of working from home and, more broadly, the work-family axis.

Yet to only interview women with these working arrangements would generate difficulties in understanding what part of their experience might have been to do with their gender, or another relevant factor. Furthermore, my first research question asks more generally about the motivations of parents, rather than mothers. Gerson and Damaske (2020) advise that in the process of developing your sample criteria the researcher must decide which key subgroups within that sample to compare. Therefore, to be able to draw conclusions about the potential gender differences in hybrid work, I aimed to interview 20 men and 20 women with similar working arrangements and compare their experiences. Without including men with similar working arrangements in my sample, it would be difficult for me to draw conclusions about gender differences or similarities and indeed, the inclusion of this comparative subgroup was the source of many of my key findings.

Finally, it is important to note in any gender-based research that gender is a spectrum, not a binary, and can include gender non-conforming and non-binary individuals. Though my study involves a comparison of cisgender men and women who parent and have hybrid work arrangements, future research should examine the experiences of non-binary or transgender people in relation to hybrid work.

Interviews with couples

⁷ Though I did not find any direct evidence for why women might be considering leaving their tech jobs, the Tech Talent Charter (2024) finds that women in tech with flexible arrangements had significantly higher retention. As such, my sample may not have been the most appropriate to shed light on this issue, though I did observe two women leave their roles due to a return to office policy.

During the research, my sample grew more complex than simply comparing different men and women with similar working arrangements after I made the decision to request interviews with the participant's spouse or partner. This is because the experience of a person in a dual-earning couple who balances hybrid work and childcare would be significantly impacted by whether their partner had a hybrid, remote, or office-based working arrangement. Imagine a person with greater flexibility in their schedule since the COVID-induced shift to hybrid work, whose partner had a more rigid, office-based schedule. The more flexible partner might assume greater overall responsibility for childcare and housework, which could then have a subsequent impact on their experience of working from home. Their taking greater responsibility for the family work could be rationalised for entirely pragmatic reasons - many of my participants who worked from home would use their flexible schedule and proximity to pause their work in the afternoon to collect their children from school, an option not as readily available for workers expected in an office. On the other hand, contradicting what might appear more 'pragmatic', it is possible that the person expected in the office may still take on a greater amount of family work.

As I discovered, a large majority of the couples I spoke to had highly similar hybrid working arrangements, even amongst couples working in different industries (see Interviewee breakdown for more details). What became more pertinent to explore via speaking to both parties in a dual-earning couple was, then, an extension of my earlier comparative question that sought to understand potential divergent gendered experiences even as schedules and divisions appeared similar on the surface. This focus allowed me to compare men and women within the same household with similar working arrangements to understand how normative and structural gendered dynamics came to bear on their experiences of balancing parenting with working from home. By interviewing each party separately, I gained an insight into how people experienced and rationalised the same event or decision in divergent ways.

A note on recruitment

During my interview with the participant working in the tech sector, I asked several questions about their partner, their partner's working arrangements, and their overall household dynamic. At the end of the interview, I would ask the participant whether they felt their partner would be interested in taking part in the research and, if so, if they could introduce us via email so that I could share the relevant information and answer any questions they might have. Though I asked at the end of all interviews, I was not able to interview all partners. Some interviewees promised to ask and then stopped replying to emails. Some emailed me after some time to notify me that they had asked their partner, who had said no. Several participants felt their partner would be too busy to take part - this appeared to have no relation to the gender of the partner. For a more in-depth discussion on potential bias in the sample introduced by this recruitment method, see Limitations.

Heterosexual, dual-earning couples

As I presented early findings in various seminars and conferences, I was often met with a question or critique to do with my choice to study heterosexual, dual-earning couples. Why not compare the experience of heterosexual couples with same-sex couples? This critique stems from the idea that the comparative consideration of how same-sex couples made decisions about family work, childcare, and working from home would shed some light on how gender norms come to bear on the decisions and experiences of opposite-gender couples. I believe that the critique may also reflect the proliferation of studies on heterosexual couples in literature about the domestic division of labour, and the wide scholarship on the gendered experience of women in the workplace.

My response to these critiques is two-fold: part theoretical, and part pragmatic. To begin with the pragmatic response, in their discussion on theoretical sampling, Gerson and Damaske (2020) note that interview samples must both limit and build in comparisons to the sample to discover and analyse potential variations in the groups selected. Without strategic comparisons, it is difficult to understand why certain patterns emerge and take certain forms, hence why I compared the experiences of men and women. Yet with too many comparative categories, it becomes impossible to discern which social dynamics or patterns give rise to certain outcomes. As my core focus was on the sense-making, decision-making, and experience of women with children who work from home, introducing the comparative group of same-sex couples risks the introduction of *too many* comparative groups into the sample, making it complicated for the lone doctoral student to analyse. It may not be possible to interview enough representatives of each category to reach saturation within the parameters of this small-sample study. This is further compounded by my other sample criteria (see Table 1), which allowed for within-sample variation to do with occupation, size of company, age of children, and partner's occupation, amongst other factors. Though a comparative study of the gender dynamics of same-sex and opposite-sex couples who work from home whilst raising children would be a fascinating line of inquiry, it was not within the scope of this project, and instead I recommend that future research devote the appropriate time and depth to understanding these dynamics.

What about single parents?

I did not include single parents in the study for similar reasons to the above, even though single mothers are at a higher risk for psychological stress than married mothers as a result of several factors, but not least because the responsibility for organising work and family life is concentrated on one parent rather than two⁸, plus the added economic strain of being in a single-income household (Sartor, Lange, and Tröster 2023). The adoption of hybrid work could begin to address some of these stressors by reducing work-life conflict and improving

⁸ The extent of this is debatable, as classical studies such as Hochschild's *The Second Shift* (Hochschild and Machung 2012) plus more recent research (Ruppanner, Perales, and Baxter 2019; Weeks and Ruppanner 2024) find that married women continue to shoulder a larger amount of childcare and housework, and take on more responsibility for family organisation than their male counterparts.

access to full-time work (Hill et al. 2010). Despite this, I theorised that a comparison of hybrid working mothers in a dual-earning partnership with hybrid working single mothers (rather than hybrid working men in a dual-earning partnership) would generate insights related more to the impact of marital status on the experiences of working women more than to the gendered adoption of hybrid work. However, when the opportunity arose, I interviewed one single mother and one father that shared parenting responsibilities with his female partner who he was separated from. Though it is impossible to draw conclusions from one representative from each group, I did not encounter any sentiments or experiences to do with hybrid work and the organisation of family life that were radically different from the partnered parents I had already interviewed.

Why heterosexual dual-earning couples?

I limit my sample to dual-earning couples rather than breadwinner-homemaker models to further understand how the experience of hybrid work might reproduce or reconfigure the competing devotions (Blair-Loy 2003) of the workplace and the family for working women. Parents with young children are among the most time-pressured demographics (Bianchi et al. 2012), and mothers in dual-earning, full-time employed couples report feeling the greatest time-pressure of all married couples (Milkie, Raley, and Bianchi 2009). As indicated by Budig and England's (2001) work on the motherhood penalty, the larger burden of childcare and housework shouldered by women previously led many to reduce their hours or exit the workforce entirely. Arguably, these working mothers stand to gain the most from increased flexibility in their working hours, which could theoretically enable them to remain in full-time employment and begin to close this gap.

Zooming in to a more micro level, because the men and women in this study juggle full-time careers with raising young children, they are already primed to be in conversation about managing the logistics of family and work life. With increasing flexibility in working hours and location, I found that my participants' schedules had become increasingly individualised. This requires greater amounts of communication, organisation, and co-ordination to ensure that important moments and tasks during the day can be met, such as school drop-offs and pick-ups, children's mealtimes, and certain work meetings and events. In fact, this greater schedule individualisation requires a greater level of individual discernment to do with which tasks and elements of the day should be categorised as important in the first place and, as I found, this could vary between men and women and reveal the ways in which gendered norms and structures continued to shape their everyday decisions.

The middle-class

My sample is not intended to be representative of all class groups in British society and, by virtue of recruiting high-tech workers in full-time careers, it is heavily weighted towards the middle-class. Hybrid work itself is largely the domain of the middle and elite classes. In the

UK, workers with higher educational qualifications are ten times more likely to hybrid work than those with no qualifications, and people with higher incomes are more likely to be hybrid workers (Office for National Statistics 2024). 45% of those in more senior occupations, defined by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) as managers, directors, and senior officials, followed a hybrid working model, compared with 27% of all other workers. Those in professional occupations also reported higher levels of hybrid working.

Only 3% of those in ‘elemental occupations’, such as cleaning, working on the shop floor, caring, or leisure services followed a hybrid working model, and this 3% is likely to be the managers and directors able to carry out desk-based work remotely, even in these high-contact industries. The association of hybrid work with professional and managerial occupations is to do with several interconnected factors. For example, the digitalisation of jobs in the knowledge economy (Valenduc and Vendramin 2017), the autonomous and task-based styles of working (Powell and Snellman 2004), and the global nature of many organisations means that professional occupations are highly amenable to remote styles of working, relying on communications technology and collaborative tools to work together from a distance. Because of the homogeneity of the sample’s socioeconomic status, it is not possible to extrapolate its findings about flexible working arrangements and family life to less privileged or economically disadvantaged households. Flexibility and its implementation maps onto class groups in different ways (Williams et al. 2013). Rather than following a hybrid model, workers in non-professional sectors often experience what Adams-Prassl et al. (2023) call employer-led flexibility, where management hold ultimate control over the shift or rota workers’ schedule, contributing to employee precarity and earnings risk. Elite workers and professionals tend to have access to employee-led flexibility, where an employee has control over their work schedule (ibid).

On a more individual level, Wong and Daminger (2024) point out that studying privileged actors enables the observation of decision-making agency among people not ‘forced’ to make those choices out of economic need or safety concerns. In her ethnography of new parents in the UK, Faircloth echoes this sentiment: “given all of the resources at the disposal of the couples featured, these extended narratives arguably magnify and clarify tensions faced by couples” (Faircloth 2022: 6). At the same time, as I explore in Chapter 6, I observed that middle-class couples still made or justified many choices by virtue of a pragmatic, financial logic, at least partly due to the high cost of childcare in the UK. Therefore, even though the couples in my sample were privileged, middle-class, working in professional and high-tech occupations, financial concerns factored in heavily to their decision making.

Interviews

Interview recruitment

I interviewed 48 participants between September 2023 and February 2025. Interviews were organised around a flexible interview guide (see the Appendix for the full interview guide). Broadly, the interview guide included questions about the person's work and home life arrangements, prompted them to describe 'average days' when working from home and working in the office, and asked them to reflect on why they arranged their lives in the way they did. At the end of the interview, I asked interviewees to consider their aspirations for the future. I utilised 'nested questions' (Gerson and Damaske 2020) and prompts that encouraged interviewees to discuss tangible examples. Fundamentally, I wanted to use the interviews to understand the choices hybrid working men and women were making, and how they made sense of those choices, to begin to understand the relevant processes, mechanisms, and relationships that might influence the gendered experience of hybrid work.

Figure 8: Interview recruitment flyer

I used several recruitment avenues, such as reaching out to friends and acquaintances working in tech, joining industry WhatsApp groups like the 'Women in HealthTech' group, and attending industry conferences such as the Women in Tech London conference. The most productive recruitment technique I used was sharing a flyer (Figure 8) on LinkedIn which was shared by others in my network. As a result, many parents got in contact with me to express their interest in taking part, after which I shared my information sheet, consent form, and arranged an interview. Although I offered to travel (within reason) for interviews, most took place online via Microsoft Teams at the interviewees' request. However, two preferred to meet in person, so I travelled to Oxford and London for those conversations. My sampling strategy of requesting an interview with my interviewee's spouse also generated several interviews with people who had not come across my advertisements. Towards the end of my data collection period, after struggling to recruit participants for my diary study, I changed the order of requests so that I first asked for a diary study and then conducted a short interview afterwards. I found this way I had a higher success rate of recruiting diary study participants (see the section on Diary Studies for more detail on this.)

Interviewee breakdown



The flyer is titled 'Are you a hybrid working parent?' and features logos for the Oxford Internet Institute and the University of Oxford. It includes two circular images: one of a woman working on a laptop and another of a family sitting on a sofa. The text on the flyer reads: 'We want to hear from you! We invite you to participate in a groundbreaking sociological study exploring the unique challenges, joys, and complexities faced by parents who work remotely.' Below this, it lists criteria for participants under 'ARE YOU:' and details of participation under 'PARTICIPATION INVOLVES:'. Contact information for PhD student Lily Rodel is provided at the bottom.

Are you a hybrid working parent?

We want to hear from you!

We invite you to participate in a groundbreaking sociological study exploring the unique challenges, joys, and complexities faced by parents who work remotely.

ARE YOU:

- The parent of a primary school aged child (5-11 years)
- Working in the tech sector
- Currently in a full-time hybrid role (partly in the office, partly remote)
- In a dual-earning couple

PARTICIPATION INVOLVES:

- A 60-minute interview in-person or by telephone or videocall
- Interviews will be anonymized

Please contact PhD student Lily Rodel at:
✉ lily.rodell@balliol.ox.ac.uk

In this section, I provide a breakdown of my interviewees by factors such as gender, seniority, and sector.

Gender

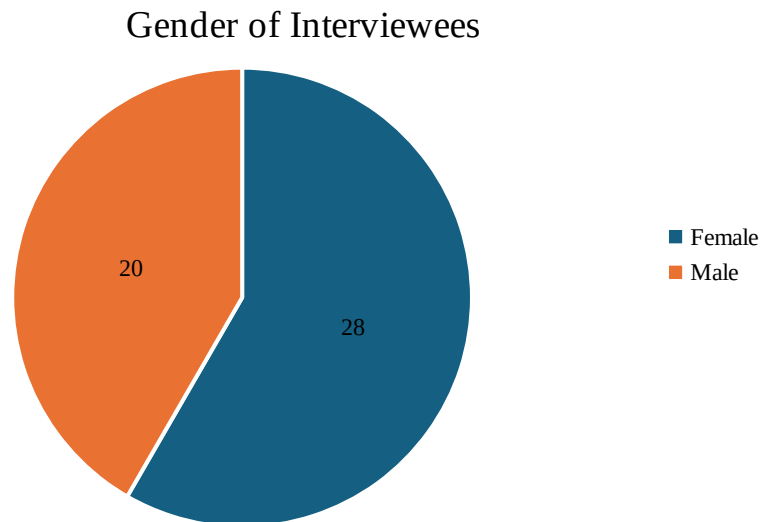


Figure 9: Gender split of interviewees

In total, I interviewed 48 people: 20 men and 28 women. Within this number, 14 (7 men and 7 women) were in a couple. 32 of these participants were employed in the tech sector and 16 were in non-tech occupations. See Table 2 for a breakdown of tech sector interviewees by gender and occupation and Table 3 for a breakdown of non-tech sector interviewees by gender and occupation.

As Table 3 and the number of interviewees working in occupations outside of the tech sector suggests, my sample clearly expanded beyond my original plan to simply compare the experiences of women and men working full-time in the tech sector. Partly this was due to tinkering with my research design to include partners and spouses, some of whom were not employed in the tech sector. Partly, this was due to my reluctance to turn down people who approached me expressing interest in participating in the study. Partly, it was due to the adjustments I was forced to make to my diary study recruitment strategy due to barriers to recruitment, explored in the following section. What all participants had in common, regardless of sector or role, is that they had hybrid working arrangements. As such, I frame my study as an analysis of tech workers *and* other knowledge economy workers. This acknowledges that the largest portion of workers in my sample were in tech roles, whilst nodding to those that were in other sectors.

Of these interviewees, most were either middle management or individual contributors (ICs) - an employee who works independently to complete tasks and projects, without managing other people. However, I did interview three men in C-Suite roles – two of which had female partners who had exited paid work several years prior to manage the home and family. I also

interviewed 14 Heads of Department, 3 of which were female and 11 of which were men. This vertical segregation in job seniority by gender reflects wider trends in the tech sector, where only 21% of senior posts are held by women (Tech Talent Charter 2024).

Gender and Occupation

Table 2. Breakdown of interviewee by gender and role in tech

Gender	Tech occupation	Number of participants
Female	Artificial Intelligence (AI)	2
	Big Tech	1
	BioTech	2
	EdTech	3
	FemTech	1
	FinTech	3
	HealthTech	1
	IT services	1
	Self-employed	4
	Travel technology platform	1
	Research	1
Total		20
Male	AdTech	2
	Big Tech	2
	EdTech	2
	FinTech	1
	IT services	4
	Cybersecurity	1
Total		12
Grand Total		32

Amongst this sample, I included four self-employed women, even though they fall outside of my sampling criteria. As per Small (2009)’s advice on sequential interviewing, I sought them out to answer particular questions that emerged from other interviews. Two of these women worked as self-employed recruiters⁹ in the tech sector. I interviewed them as I was interested in their insight on female employment trends in the sector – why there were less women recruited in the tech sector, and why women might have been leaving the sector at certain moments. The other two women I recruited because they were from a racially minoritized background, and I was struggling to recruit Black female interviewees in permanent roles within the tech sector at that time, although I did have success later on. As both of these women worked in contract-based roles, moving from firm to firm, I felt they may still have important insights as to how the trend toward hybrid work might be shaping the experience of

⁹ A recruiter is someone who finds and matches candidates with job openings.

work for Black women. See the Appendix for further data on the types of roles held by women and men in the tech and non-tech sector(s).

Table 3. Breakdown of interviewee by gender and non-tech sector

Gender	Non-tech occupation	Number of participants
Female	Charity	1
	Construction ¹⁰	1
	Higher Education	1
	PR and Communications	2
	Public sector	1
	Publishing	1
	Recruitment	1
Total		8
Male	Consumer goods	1
	Finance	1
	Market research	2
	PR and Communications	1
	Public sector	3
Total		8
Grand Total		16

Ethnicity

What I did not set in my original sample criteria was the ethnic background of my interviewees. See Table 4 for a breakdown of interviewee ethnic background. Reporting from The Tech Talent Charter finds that the tech sector has a relatively higher proportion of people from racially minoritized backgrounds compared to the UK workforce overall, at 25%, though this is likely due to the concentration of tech firms in London, which has a more diverse population (Tech Talent Charter 2024). 22% of participants in my sample were from a racially minoritized background. However, as I discussed in my section on sampling strategy, my intent was not to establish a representative sample, but to interview a variety of participants to reveal the underlying mechanisms and shed light on the behaviours, rationales, and dynamics relevant to my core research questions.

During the course of my data collection, I noted that my interviewees had been mainly from a White ethnic background, and I began to feel that interviewees were repeating similar themes. Therefore, I began to specifically reach out to men and women from other ethnic backgrounds to understand whether this might contribute to diverging experiences of hybrid work and if that mapped onto gendered patterns. What I discovered was that the ethnic

¹⁰ This participant worked in an office-based, project management role in the Construction sector. Therefore, I still consider their occupation to fall within the “knowledge economy worker” bracket.

background of the participant did not hold as much significance to the experience of hybrid work as did their access to family networks in the UK. If a person moved to the UK and had children whilst other members of their family still lived in a different country, they felt they lacked access to what could have been a vital childcare support network. This was not necessarily related to whether the person was from a racially minoritized background. It could apply to participants from a White ethnic background, such as a woman from Germany whose mother and father still lived in Germany, whereas a British Asian woman may have access to multiple generations of family to help with the regular and emergency care of children. That being said, I also encountered several British families who were not able to rely on grandparental support for childcare even when living in proximity, due to several factors such as age, illness or frailty, or because they were already oversubscribed with the care of other young children in the family.

Table 4. Breakdown of interviewees by ethnic background

Asian	5
Chinese	1
Indian	4
Black	4
African	3
Caribbean	1
Other	2
Arab	1
Mauritian	1
Non-White	11
White	37
British	28
Bulgarian	1
German	2
Italian	2
Jewish	1
Norwegian	1
Swedish	2
Total	48

Limitations

Here I outline what I perceive as the limitations to the interview element of this study and discuss how I manage these. Firstly, as all ethical interview-based studies do, this research relies on people volunteering to be interviewed, and therefore is vulnerable to self-selection bias (Robinson 2014). The findings are therefore likely to be biased in some way towards the sentiments held by the types of people who are likely to volunteer for research on the

experience of hybrid work. This logic also extends to the diary study element of this project. I posit that the people who self-select into this research may be those who value hybrid work, particularly in a context where such arrangements are coming under threat by the rising number of return to office (RTO) mandates. Additionally, as many of my interviewees were recruited via LinkedIn, we may share similar circles and online echo chambers. I have attempted to mitigate the possibility of this bias via my sampling strategy of sequential interviewing (Small 2009) and the incorporation of the views of my interviewee's spouses, who may not have volunteered without prompting. At the same time, the introduction of my interviewee's spouses arguably introduces an extra layer to the self-selection bias that exists, where I am only able to share and compare the views of couples that volunteered. For those individual interviewees whose spouses I was not able to interview, I do not have the same depth of knowledge of their home and family systems, nor potential gendered divergences or convergences.

I was able to recruit more women than men to the study. I wondered whether this was due to the social dynamics already mentioned in the sampling section to do with the association of flexible work with working mothers, and whether women felt more of a social imperative to contribute to this research. In my recruitment materials, I stated the research's interest in the experience of parents who follow a hybrid working model. The men who volunteered for my study may therefore be slightly biased towards those who use these working arrangements specifically for the care of children. I attempted to address this bias by asking my interviewees to share my research in their personal and professional networks, noting that I had struggled to recruit men for interviews, but again those that volunteered as a result may have already been predisposed to be thinking about how to manage childcare with hybrid working arrangements.

Asking people about areas of their family life, such as the division of housework and childcare, can be fraught with norms of social desirability (Lareau and Rao 2022). As pointed out by Lareau and Rao, the claims made by parents may not be supported by the observations made by a researcher conducting an ethnographic study. Though I acknowledge that this bias very likely exists within my sample, I do not disregard the way people tell me they see themselves and their choices - even if this narrative is driven by the desire to appear in accordance with dominant social norms. In analysing what people say not necessarily as an objective representation of how they always behave, but as the interpretation and crystallisation of social dynamics and structures, the interview remains a valuable tool for analysis. Particularly with this sample and with these questions, I explored how men and women proclaimed their commitment to gender-egalitarian values whilst demonstrating divergent experiences of the home that were stratified by gender, and engaging in behaviours that appeared, to the researcher's point of view, in conflict with egalitarian principles. Therefore, when acknowledged and put into conversation with further data, such as diary study data and interviews with spouses and partners, the existence of social desirability bias

in the sample can create productive tensions and puzzles to solve within the research. I continue my discussion of social desirability bias in *Reflexivity and Positionality*.

Lastly, I designed the research to involve one interview and, potentially, one diary study, giving me insight into a period of one or two weeks in their lives. Yet as I was connected with many of my research participants on LinkedIn, I was notified when they left their jobs and found new ones. This was particularly surprising in the case of several participants who had shared very positive experiences of their employers and who had not shared any ambition to leave with me. Though I reached out via email, I often did not receive a response and so it is difficult to gauge why they might have left. Could it have been that their employer announced a return to office policy, and they were forced to leave? Could they have fallen victim to the rounds of redundancies and restructures that seemed never ending in 2023-2024? Had they simply found a better role? I wondered whether they had concealed any unpleasant experiences of their previous employer that may have led them to search for new employment. Upon discovering that several participants had found different jobs, I reached out to all interviewees to say hello, give them an update on my research, and ask how they were doing. As a result, I had two Teams calls and two email exchanges with participants who had all left their previous roles. Though a small number, it gave me an idea of the reasons people had for changing roles: redundancy and searching for better flexibility in the face of RTOs.

Multi-Modal Diary Study

Inside the diary

I collected diary data between April 2024 – December 2024, and in this time the diary study went through several format iterations as I dealt with issues around recruitment and attrition. See the following sections ‘Recruitment plans’ and ‘Recruitment reality’ for an in-depth discussion on my recruitment strategy and the barriers I faced. In this section, I describe the practical features of the diary study, the pilot study I ran and its learnings, the recruitment strategy I used, a demographic breakdown of study participants, and a consideration of limitations.

The platform

The ethnographic diary study was hosted by the app and website Field Notes¹¹. Field Notes is a platform for capturing and managing videos, audios, text, and photos recorded by people via their smartphones in response to prompts set by the researcher. The app is most often used by market researchers but is increasingly being used in academic research. Mobile phone apps are a useful and non-intrusive way of gathering diary data in ways that

¹¹ Field Notes granted me pro bono access to the platform between February 2024 - January 2025. See <https://www.fieldnotes.space/> for the official website.

participants are already familiar with, as they upload their photos and videos in a similar way to social media.

I had access to a project backend via the Field Notes website where I could invite and manage participants, set and edit the tasks, view their responses, and send the participants messages that they would receive to their smartphones. Participants received an email invite to take part in the study and a link to download the Fieldnotes app to their phone. Once followed, it automatically registered them to the project and displayed the tasks set.

Study structure

When planning the diary study, I set it to run over a two-week timeframe. Participants were asked to provide descriptions of what they did and how they felt on three days each week – a total of six days across a timespan of two weeks. I requested they provide data on a day working from home, a day working in the office, and a weekend day, each week. If the participant did not work in the office or from home at that frequency, they were able to adjust their responses to reflect their schedule e.g. both days working from home. I also set several photo-based tasks to gain more visual insight into their daily lives. See Figure 10 for a visual representation of the participant’s view of tasks from their smartphone, provided by Field Notes, and Table 5 for a breakdown of the tasks and instructions I set.

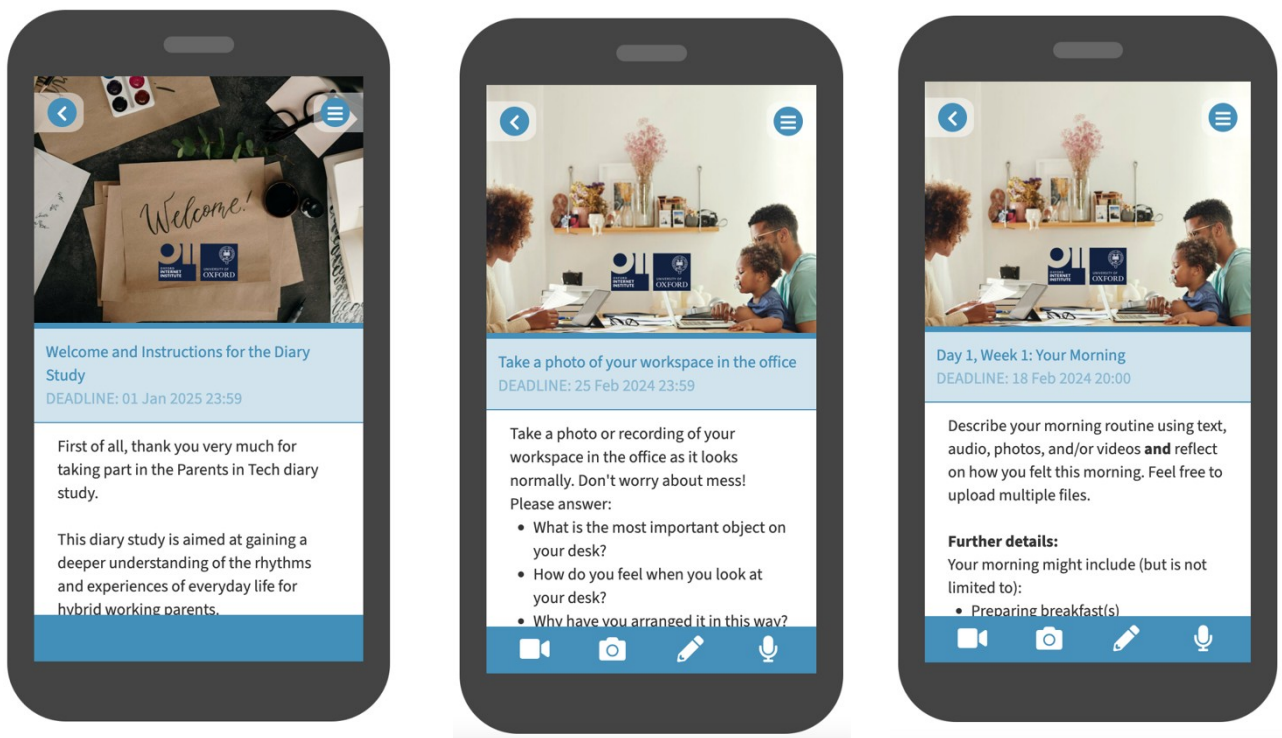


Figure 10. Visual representation of participant view of diary app tasks. From left to right: Welcome and Instructions for the Diary Study, A photo-based task, and a daily reflective task.

Table 5. Digital diary study task list

Task	Task title	Task type	Task description
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number			
1	Welcome and Instructions for the Diary Study	Read-only	A welcome message for participants including instructions for the diary study and my contact details.
2	Share a snapshot of your life	Photo-based	Select 5 images on your camera roll that represent: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A moment with family • A moment at work • A moment at home • Your favourite time of the week • Your least favourite time of the week
3	Share a photo or screenshot of your calendar	Photo-based	Share a photo or screenshot of your calendar. If you have multiple calendars, please share them.
4	Take a photo of your office workspace.		Take a photo or video of the office workspace. Provide a short caption describing the most important object on your desk, how you feel when you look at your desk, and why you have arranged it that way.
5	Take a photo of your home workspace.		Take a photo or video of the home workspace. Provide a short caption describing the most important object on your desk, how you feel when you look at your desk, and why you have arranged it that way.
6	Day 1, Week 1: Your Morning		Using text, audio, photo, or video, describe what you did and how you felt this

			<p>morning.</p> <p>Examples of what to include: who was there, what technology you used, where you were, and if anything out of the ordinary happened.</p>
7	Day 1, Week 1: Your Working Day		<p>Using text, audio, photo, or video, describe what you did and how you felt during the working day.</p> <p>Examples of what to include: who was there, what technology you used, where you were, and if anything out of the ordinary happened.</p>
8	Day 1, Week 1: Your Evening		<p>Using text, audio, photo, or video, describe what you did and how you felt this evening.</p> <p>Examples of what to include: who was there, what technology you used, where you were, and if anything out of the ordinary happened.</p>
9	Repeat 3 daily tasks		<p>Repeat the Morning, Day, and Evening tasks for a day working from home, working in the office, and a day on the weekend.</p>
10	Last reflections		<p>Film a video, record an audio, or write a caption narrating your experience completing the diary study.</p> <p>Prompts to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you realise anything new? • Did anything surprise you?

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the process of recording entries like for you? Did you find it time-consuming?
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Pilot study

In his guide to analysing multi-modal diary data, Nezelek (2012) recommends building in a pilot protocol to test diary study design and avoid the possibility of receiving high volumes of unusable data. I invited four mothers in my network to take part in a one-week pilot study to test the prompts. One woman was on maternity leave with her young baby, one woman had recently returned to work following maternity leave, one woman had three young children with two in primary school and one in nursery, and the final woman had adult children who no longer lived with her.

I used the pilot to test whether the time and effort commitment of a two-week diary study was too great and how well my tasks and prompts worked to elicit useful reflections. I quickly discovered that prompt design must be carefully crafted to elicit insight into emotional states. On the first day, diarists responded to my original Day 1 prompt, that asked them to describe the events of their morning. I had placed my prompt concerning the emotional quality of their morning in “Examples of what to consider” in the task description. The first entries described their morning routines in great practical detail: see below in Figure 11. When reading these entries, I realised I was interested in the subjective quality of working from home, and whether that might diverge by gender.

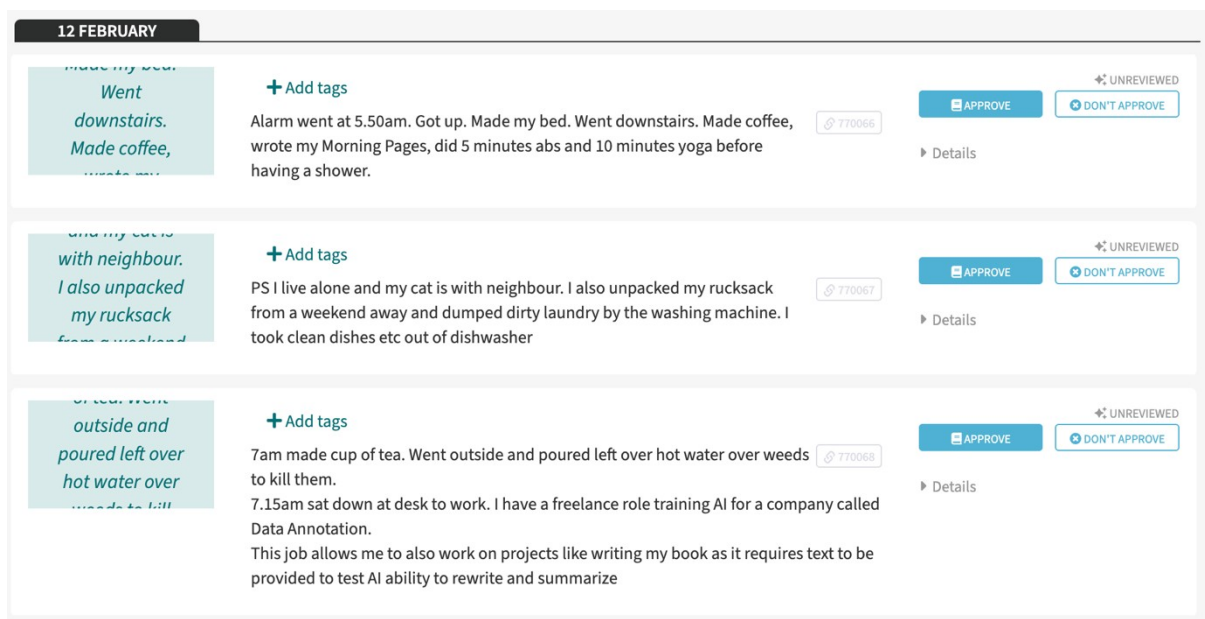


Figure 11. A response to Day 1, Week 1: Your Morning

The app allows me to adjust the wording of tasks even as tasks are live. After receiving these entries, I adjusted the wording to reflect my interest in their routines and specifically discuss their emotional and subjective experience of them and began to receive more detail. See Figure 12 below:

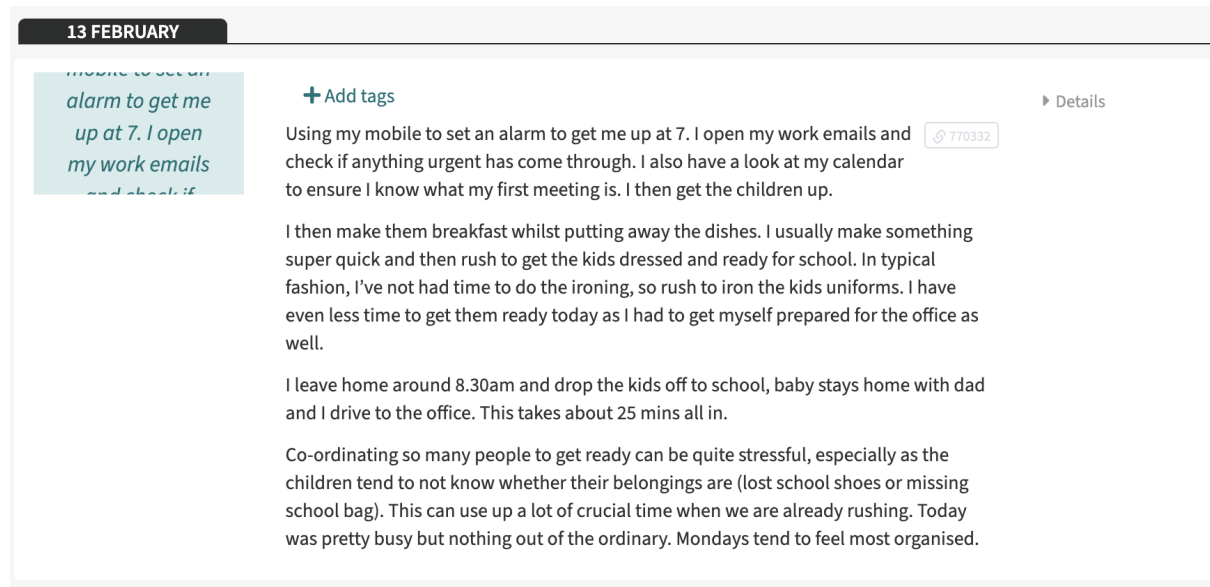


Figure 12: A later response from a different woman to Day 1, Week 1: Your Morning

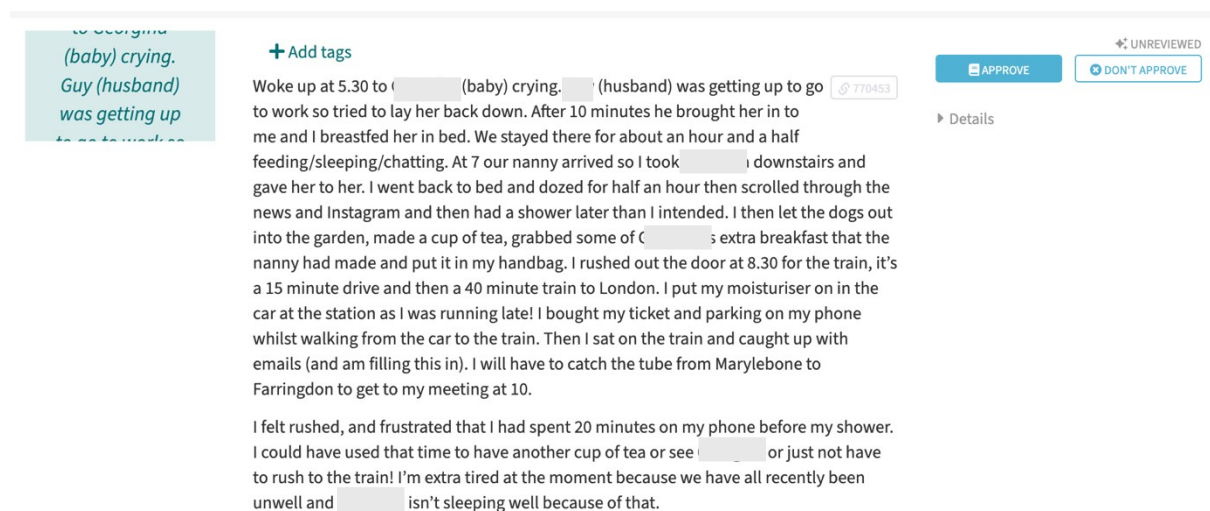


Figure 13: A later response from a different woman to Day 1, Week 1: Your Morning

In these entries, the reader is granted a vivid, sensory picture of life for these mothers. In Figure 12, the stress of the morning rush is palpable, and we gain an insight into the juggle of domestic labour being done at high speed. In Figure 13, we see a similar sense of the morning rush and frustration albeit far more mention of both paid for and paternal labour in the home.

During the pilot, I noticed that the mothers did not utilise the video or photo function much unless specifically required to by the task. One participant shared their breakfast on the train:

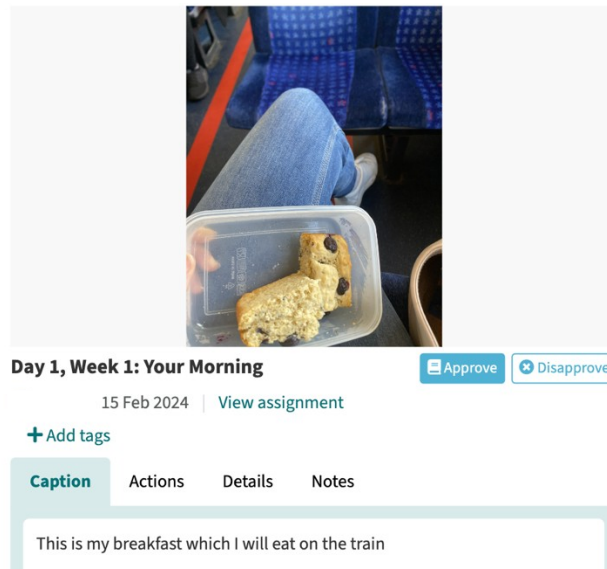


Figure 14: Unprompted image as part of Day 1, Week 1: Your Morning

The choice of this photo was interesting to me: the breakfast, carried in a Tupperware and eaten in transit, relates to the rush that this participant felt to arrive to work at a particular time. I reflected that explicitly requesting photos that reflected specific themes may be a useful way to see the world through the eyes of the participant and enable an analysis that attends to the choice of subject, the framing, and the caption of the photo.

Overall, because of the pilot, I discovered that participants responded well to more explicit requests for emotional reflections and photo-based entries. I adjusted the tasks by adding task 2 and 3 on Table 5 before I began inviting participants for the diary study. Finally, I spoke briefly with all pilot participants to understand whether they felt the time commitment was too much, particularly as in the real study I hoped to recruit participants for two weeks. All pilot participants felt that the process did not feel too time-consuming.

Recruitment plans

After conducting my pilot and making edits to my tasks, I recruited my diary study participants from my pre-existing interview sample. Inspired by the recruitment approach set out by Lareau and Rao (2022) in their guide to intensive family observation, I mentioned my plans to conduct a diary study at the end of my interviews with men and women and gauged their interest levels. Like Rao, I did not immediately invite them to participate. Instead, I waited until I had conducted approximately 20 interviews so that I could review any conceptual categories that were emerging from interviews to explore further.

As a result of my interviews, I discerned a common belief amongst men and women that progression in one's career still required in-person presence and physical visibility at key moments – "showing willing", as one woman described it – even when following a hybrid model. However, not all women and men identified as actively seeking career progression,

and instead used their hybrid working arrangements to maintain a full-time career to attend to the needs of their family more fully. Many felt that they would ‘leave the door open’ to pursue their careers with more dedication once their children had grown older. Therefore, I intended to select an equal number of male and female representatives of the following categories for participation in the diary study:

- Mothers actively seeking career progression whilst their children are young (primary-school aged).
- Fathers actively seeking career progression whilst their children are young.
- Mothers not actively seeking career progression while their children are young.
- Fathers not actively seeking career progression while their children are young.

Once I had determined these categories, I began to reach out to previous interviewees that I felt matched the criteria to invite them to participate. Please see the Appendix for my original email wording.

Recruitment reality: The limitations of conducting diary studies

Difficulties in recruitment and attrition once on the study are well-documented barriers to conducting a qualitative diary study (Kenten 2010; Nezlek 2012). The people in my sample were, by the nature of this research project and its questions, a time-poor demographic who were busy with juggling work and the responsibilities involved in raising young children. I was aware that by requesting their participation in the diary study, I could be adding to their mental load (Dean et al. 2022) of tasks to complete in a day. Perhaps it is unsurprising then, that though I felt I had built good rapport with my interviewees and many seemed open to taking part in the study when discussed, recruitment proved a difficult and time-consuming process requiring many follow-ups, reminders, and check-ins. Some participants failed to respond to my email inviting them to take part in the diary study, nor the subsequent follow-ups I sent. On several occasions, a potential participant would get as far as downloading the app, only to stop responding to emails and enquiries. Though I had outlined the task requirements of the study in the original email (see Appendix for email invite wording), I concluded that they felt participation would be too onerous or too intrusive. On one occasion, a man who had agreed to take part pulled out after seeing the tasks, as he felt they were too personal, despite my attempts to mitigate this possibility by being clear about what the tasks required in the invite email. Overall, I found that men were harder to recruit to the diary study than women and were far more likely than women to stop responding to emails once they had downloaded the app (see [Diary study breakdown](#) for further details on the gender of participants). Conversely, women tended to be more responsive to my emails and were more likely to agree to take part.

Attrition once on the study was also a significant barrier to collecting a full, comparable set of diary studies. I noticed a strong gendered pattern in the attrition of participants. Women

were much more likely to complete the diary study than men, many of whom failed to complete each task in the diary. Whilst I have several full-length, two-week long diary studies completed by women, with extensive reflection, engagement with the tasks, and multi-modal entries, I was not able to collect this from the male participants, despite several attempts at follow-ups and reminders via the app's messaging function and via email. Instead, I have several one or two-day long diaries, and several one-week long diaries from men. On reflection, I realised I should have recruited men for the pilot of my diary study to understand whether there might have been a gendered response to the method itself.

The implications of these barriers to recruitment and retention are that the data I was able to collect is biased towards women; I have a far greater insight into their daily routines, rhythms, and emotional states. As I explore in my empirical chapters, I found that women shoulder a much higher cognitive and emotional load than men when it comes to family and work. One might conclude that this would render them *less* likely to complete an extra set of cognitive and emotional tasks and, due to men's proportionately lighter cognitive load in the home, *more likely* to complete the diary study tasks. However, as became evident, the trend towards women taking greater responsibility of emotional and cognitive tasks was echoed and reproduced in the patterns of recruitment and attrition of the diary study.

Moving from chosen design to dictated design

The barriers I encountered in recruitment and attrition led me to revisit the structure of the study and the way I recruited participants. Using the term 'the hustle', Collett (2024) describes how accessing elites in qualitative research often requires "the pushing and jostling of the qualitative researcher in the face of resistance" (p556). Building on her analysis in the context of this diary study, I found that pushing and jostling was ultimately ineffective in the face of attrition, particularly in digitally mediated communication where emails can be missed, ignored, or deleted. The ineffectiveness of pushing or jostling was magnified by my strategy of selecting participants for the diary study from a relatively small group of people – those categories I had discerned in my interview sample. Once I had sent a request and followed up three times over a period of several months, I had to draw a line under the possibility that they might participate.

Instead, I adapted my research design from my "chosen design", outlined in Recruitment plans, to a "dictated design", and aimed to collect rich data rather than being led by the goal of saturation amongst male participants (Collett 2024). Adopting a dictated design with the goal of recruiting a greater number of men involved adjusting both my recruitment method and the structure of my study in the following ways:

- **Expanding the sample criteria.** Firstly, I decided to open out my recruitment beyond the conceptual categories I had identified within my interviewee sample, and shared a diary study recruitment flyer on LinkedIn, see Figure 15. After a person expressed their interest, I would send them details on the study and the commitment it involved and offer them a short call to discuss.
- **Reversing the interview-diary study order.** I reversed the order of my data collection, choosing to interview the diary study participant after completion, to ask clarifying questions, collect further demographic data, and explore relevant themes (Kenten 2010).
- **Shortening the diary study.** As I had been unsuccessful in collecting a two-week long diary study from men, I decided to shorten the study to a one-week timeframe where I collected data from photo-based prompts and three days out of the week. The interview with the participant would provide a space to explore emergent themes in more depth.

Are you a parent with a hybrid work arrangement?

We want to hear from you!

We invite you to participate in a groundbreaking sociological study exploring the unique challenges, joys, and complexities faced by parents who work remotely.

ARE YOU:

- The parent of a primary school aged child or under (0-11 years)
- Currently in a full-time hybrid role (partly in the office, partly remote)
- In a dual-earning couple

PARTICIPATION INVOLVES:

Completing an online diary about your daily schedule and routine over 3 days using **Fieldnotes** app.

Please contact PhD student Lily Rodel at:

✉ lily.rodell@balliol.ox.ac.uk

Figure 15. Diary study recruitment flyer shared on LinkedIn.

As a result of these changes, I was able to recruit more men and women to the study. It is debatable whether attrition was decreased through these changes, as two male participants still only completed one to two days of the study. However, the reversal of the order meant that if they agreed to interview, I could supplement the diary data with the interview data. On the other hand, in one case, one man did not respond to my request for an interview, leaving me without certain demographic details important for analysis.

Diary study breakdown

In this section, I provide a breakdown on the gender, role, and completion rates of the diary studies.

Gender and Occupation

In total, 15 people completed the diary study. Due to the previously discussed gendered patterns in recruitment, I collected data from nine women and six men – see Figure 16. The participants were from a mix of tech and non-tech occupations – see Table 6.

Gender of Diary Study Participants

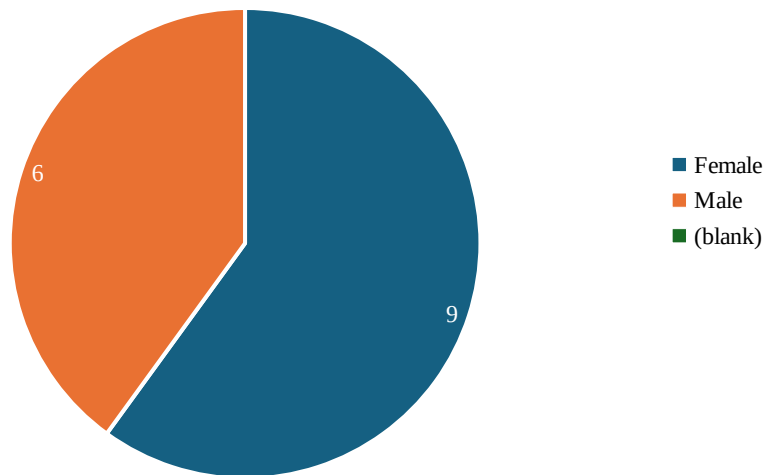


Figure 16. Gender breakdown of diary study participants who completed at least one day of the diary.

Table 6. Breakdown of diary study participant by gender and sector.

Female	9
Charity	1
EdTech	2
FinTech	1
HealthTech	1
Higher Education	1
Publishing	1
Research	1
Travel technology platform	1
Male	6
EdTech	1
IT services	3
Public sector	2

Gender and completion rate

In the final iteration of the diary study, participants were asked to complete four photo-based tasks, nine Day-in-the-Life tasks, and one reflective task – a total of fourteen tasks over the course of one week. Table 7 shows a breakdown of the count and percentage of how many tasks were completed by gender.

Table 7. Breakdown of number of entries by gender.

Gender	Number of tasks complete	Number of
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		participants
Female	Complete (100% of tasks)	7
	5 tasks (36% of tasks)	1
	4 tasks (29% of tasks)	1
Male	Complete (100% of tasks)	2
	3 tasks (21% of tasks)	2
	2 tasks (14% of tasks)	1
	1 task (7% of tasks)	1

Limitations

The most significant limitation facing the diary element of this study is the small number of completed studies, coupled with the barriers to male recruitment and engagement. Only nine diary studies were fully completed out of 15. Of these nine, only two were from men. Earlier in this section I outlined how I sought to circumvent these limitations, with some success. Here, I briefly discuss the meaning and implications of this small sample number.

Fundamentally, the smaller number of male participants – in both interviews and diaries – means that the insights generated by this study are weighted towards the perspectives of my female participants. I was not able to achieve the 50-50 comparison that I initially hoped to. In the following empirical chapters, it will become evident that this limitation translates into my findings, as I am able to provide a ‘thicker’, richer insight into the lives and perspectives of women, and use data from male participants as a counterpoint. Despite these limitations, when triangulated with the larger number of interviews, the small amount of data collected from the diary remains valuable in shedding light on everyday moments and processes that may have been disregarded or forgotten about during the interview. Additionally, even one complete diary could generate up to ten pages worth of entries, plus photos, videos, and audios, making it a rich source of data.

Furthermore, I suggest that while male attrition could be considered a limitation, it can also be reinterpreted in light of the normative gendered landscape that this thesis analyses. I suggest that it is productive to this study to interrogate the gendered patterns of recruitment and attrition on this study – an exploration of the gendered dynamics of hybrid work. Within this interrogation, I posit that rather than asking why time-poor women engaged more fully, it is more useful to explore how women’s structural responsabilisation for digitally managing work and family life in fact makes them more attuned, and perhaps more compelled, to engage with a method premised on reflection and coordination. Conversely, this leads to an exploration for why men may not have been incentivised to participate to the same extent than their female counterparts.

Ultimately, participating in a diary study that asked for further reflective, emotional, and cognitive labour was an extension of a role many women were already performing. In contrast, men's disengagement can be understood as an effect of their relative positions of structural privilege. Exempt from interpretive labour (Graeber 2012) in their everyday lives, they may have had little incentive to engage in a method that asked them to do that same work (see Chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion on interpretive labour). Indeed, because of these positions of structural inequality, women may have been positioned to notice cognitive inequity and to desire change – in participating in the diary study, they may have wished to draw attention to an otherwise invisible dimension of family life for working women, which the men in this study were less likely to notice and thus less likely to seek change. In sum, the gendered patterns of participation in the diary study offer insight into the very dynamics the research sought to explore. Rather than seeing this as a limitation, I suggest it reveals the gendered contours of digital and emotional labour in hybrid working families that further illuminated who notices, who narrates, and who is structurally positioned to care.

Analysis

Techniques for analysing multi-media data

The complete set of analysed materials include the data collected via interviews – transcripts and memos – plus the data collected via diary studies – text entries, transcribed audio entries, and photos (see Appendix for an example of a diary study entry.) I stored this data in NVivo and followed the widely cited approach to thematic analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach follows several consecutive stages, including familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and generating and naming themes. Though I had a good idea of what themes might emerge from the coding process thanks to the grounding I had in the literature and in the data collection itself, I generated all codes inductively from multiple re-reads of the data, building my codebook from the ground-up.

When it came to handling my multi-media data, I coded the transcripts of audios uploaded to the diary study in the same way as I did my transcribed interviews, but also included a consideration of who, why, and how the participant used the audio function. Much like the voice note function on messaging app WhatsApp, sending audio data enabled the participant to multitask, for example by recording a message whilst ironing clothes. Perhaps due to the tendencies towards multitasking in other areas of life, it was solely women who used the audio function. As my analysis progressed, it became clearer how the gendered use of the diary study tool mirrored many of the gendered dynamics I observed in the organisation of working from home, leading to further insights on how women and men integrate technology into their everyday practices.

The images I received also required more consideration. Like audio uploads, I identified multiple layers within images to code for, such as how the image was created and/or composed, the choice of subject, the framing and aesthetic structure, and any accompanying caption – what Konecki (2011) calls multi-slice imagining. I felt fortunate in the photos my participants trusted me with; intimate snapshots of their daily lives, such as a baby resting on her father’s chest in bed, grandparents sitting on the floor playing with a child, and photos of messy kitchens, hallways, and home offices. After reflecting on the ethics of sharing these photos, there were several photos I decided not to include in this thesis – direct photos of participants’ faces where they are clearly identifiable, whether adult or child. As the photos were taken by the diary study participant, the subjects of the photos may not have been fully aware or consenting to their publication in this research. Therefore, while they certainly play into the way I write about these families’ lives, I chose not to share the images directly in this document. Instead, I described the images using text prompts to ChatGPT to generate images that captured the composition, but not the identities, in photographs shared.

Writing as a Form of Analysis

Coding and analysis is a time-consuming and detailed process, one where I often found myself so zoomed in to the data that it was difficult to imagine any broader themes. As I progressed, I struggled to synthesize my codes into broader themes without feeling like I was somehow losing the essence of what I had observed or what someone had told me. Partly I felt that NVivo, and the way its affordances are built around categorisation, were to blame, but it was also most likely to do with my own levels of experience and fatigue (see Appendix for my codebook). After I had stared at NVivo for a few weeks, I decided to take a different approach. Gabb and Fink (2015) describe the commonplace practice in qualitative analysis to identify a ‘gold dust quote’ through which ‘juicy’ quotes can be identified. Though they critique the tendency of such practices to lead to “sound bites which illustrate headline grabbing claims” (p978), I found the practice of focusing on a particularly shiny story, anecdote, or interaction told by one of my participants in diary or interview format to be crucial for the progression of my analysis. I picked out these ‘gold dust’ moments, opened a blank document, and began to write them into larger vignettes that I felt captured an intertwinement of themes that spoke to the core questions of my research – that of the shifting and continuous expectations of work and family in a post-pandemic age, expectations that are mediated by technology and by gender. Often, I would refer to my codes as I wrote, refining, adding more, and synthesizing them. In this way, drafting vignettes became a later stage form of analysis for me, helping me to visualise how to fit the pieces of the data together.

Reflexivity and Positionality

In this final section, I reflect on my own positionality and how it played into the research process. I have no doubt that my status as a young, white woman, collecting data for her PhD at the University of Oxford, facilitated my access to many of my interview participants. As

noted in my discussion on the middle-class, the participants of this study are highly educated and well-paid, with several holding senior and C-Suite level roles. They were busy individuals and my research, presumably, held a low priority for them. Interviews were frequently rescheduled and even missed, only to be picked up again several months later. Organisation was occasionally mediated by secretaries who managed the interviewee's diary and or calendar software such as Calendly.

Despite this, I do not view my research as an example of 'studying up', which refers to conducting ethnographic research on elites or those in power (Nader 1969), nor of studying the subaltern or marginalised, but rather as an example of 'studying sideways' (Ortner 2009). Studying sideways involves studying people who share a similar cultural, educational, or professional background. In Ortner's work on the Hollywood independent film industry, she argues that anthropologists researching media industries are often studying their peers – that is, the people involved in production and cultural creation, much like academics. Though my research does not take place in the media industry like Ortner's study, many of my participants volunteered to take part due to personal interest; they had taken a course in sociology or anthropology at university, or they conducted interviews as part of their User Research role, and they wanted to see how it felt to be on the other side. One participant even held a PhD in anthropology. Yet beyond this, a vast majority of the people I spoke to expressed their sense that it was important to talk about the experiences of work and parenthood, that sharing their thoughts and experiences felt like "therapy", and that perhaps they could make a contribution towards a more public understanding of these issues by participating in my research.

I recognise that, like many of my research participants, my experience as a white British woman who was raised in London shapes my perception of gender and feminism in line with the values of egalitarianism and liberal feminism. As a woman who hopes to start a family and also to continue to work in a career I am passionate about, I share many of the views of my participants when it comes to the possibilities of flexibility and hybrid work. In Oakley's (1981) piece on interviewing women, she critiques the masculinist mythology of 'hygienic' research that views the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production, and instead states that "personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and admit others into their lives" (p209). Though I would not go as far as to claim friendship with my interviewees, I agree with Oakley's challenge to the extractive, "neutral" research process – my participants and I were friendly, and I was open with sharing details about my life when asked. Ultimately, I acknowledged that I had a predisposition towards how I perceived hybrid work and was careful to assess my own positionality during the analysis process. I was mindful to not assign any moral evaluations to my findings, but instead to continue to explore the underlying drivers of the behaviour and rationales that I observed.

I was transparent with participants about my research's focus on the way gender shaped the experience of working from home. On reflection, I believe that this may have shaped what men and women felt comfortable sharing with me. Many of the women were extraordinarily generous with what they chose to share with me, and I often felt like a confidant as women shared conflicts within their marriages or difficult experiences of sexism at work. That being said, "woman" is not a monolithic category and there are dynamics of power and social divisions between women to do with factors such as ethnic or socioeconomic background which may have shaped what was shared in ways not immediately apparent (Crenshaw 2020; Oakley 2016). Men were less likely to share with me the conflicts they may have had with their partners about relevant topics such as the organisation of family life or the acceptance of a job with no flexible arrangements, and I often discovered these conflicts during my interview with their female partner. Whether this was due to a reluctance to share personal details with a relative stranger, the fact that I was a woman studying gender inequality and they presumed I held a certain moral standpoint, or it simply did not occur to them to share is impossible to say. However, I wondered whether it was evidence for the presence of social desirability bias. Ultimately, I was mindful to simply note these differences and factor them into my subsequent analysis and writing.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explained how and why I conducted my research, which explores how the rising prevalence of hybrid working arrangements reproduces or reconfigures contemporary gender norms in the UK. I utilised a qualitative methodology to study the everyday, recruiting men and women in dual-earning couples with children under the age of 11. My methods included interviews and diary studies. I explained the barriers and limitations I encountered and how I overcame them. I also explored how the specific limitations of the methods I chose in fact enabled theoretical insights into the intersection between technology, gender, and cognitive labour that echoed my empirical findings. To conclude, my research approach enabled me to gain an insight into the mundane, hidden, and subjective dynamics that shape the experience of hybrid work for men and women.

Chapter 4

The Hybrid Home: How Hybrid Work Reshapes the Gendered Experience of the Home

Figure 17 “Here is a picture of me almost causing a fire after putting a toast in the toaster twice, distracted by a crying baby.” Elena, Diary study entry



Introduction

This chapter explores how hybrid work reshapes the gendered experience of the home, focusing specifically on how the increased flexibility of working arrangements reconfigures and reproduces the gendered division of domestic labour among heterosexual dual-earning couples. In this chapter, I focus primarily on the experience of working at home when following a hybrid model. Ultimately, I show how hybrid work does not just shift the location of work - it restructures the possibilities for how caregiving responsibilities are distributed in everyday life in ways that both re-embed and unsettle gendered norms. I adopt a sociomaterial lens (Orlikowski 2007) that analyses the gendered experience of working from home as materially and technologically constituted. Technologies such as shared calendars, messaging apps, reminders, and videoconference calls are not its neutral infrastructure, but reconfigure the home as a digitally mediated, always-on landscape of care-related reminders and notifications that are managed simultaneously with paid work.

By allowing parents to flex their working schedules around childcare needs, hybrid work creates opportunities for a seemingly more equitable division of day-to-day domestic labour and childcare. Yet while this allows parents greater presence with their children, enabling men to enact emergent “engaged dad” norms, the underlying work of coordinating the temporal and spatial demands of increasingly leaky work-family lives remains disproportionately shouldered by women. Managing the overlap of care and work when working from home gives rise to emotions like guilt and stress, even as women express their enjoyment of increased opportunities to spend time with their children.

The digital devices on which hybrid work depends are simultaneously used to organise and respond to caregiving responsibilities, producing experiences of time that are dense, fragmented, and interruption prone. Conversely, men appear better able to ‘close the door’ on caregiving responsibilities during the working day, both physically and digitally. However, I also highlight fledgling attempts among couples to redistribute the coordinative load of family life using a combination of collaborative approaches to the digital technologies used to coordinate family life and the improved access to flexibility offered by hybrid work arrangements, arguing that this may represent the fragile seeds of normative change.

The chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I explore a vignette of Amelia and Amir to demonstrate how despite egalitarian gender values and an “even” approach to the division of routine care, women in hybrid-working couples remain responsible for the management and organisation of family life. Then, I take a sociomaterial lens to show how hybrid work arrangements intensify the need for coordinative labour, touching on stories from Elizabeth, Edward, Diana, and David. Finally, I explore the ways couples attempt to more equally share the coordinative labour, finding a complex arena of competing gendered responsibilities that both unsettles and reproduces gendered divisions of responsibility in the home.

Why Does She Still Pack the Bags? Gendered Divisions of Labour in Hybrid Working Households

In London, I interview a married couple named Amelia and Amir. Amir is warm and easy-going, with a relaxed and humorous way of speaking about his life. Son of Iranian immigrants to the UK, he now works in market research at a London firm. Amelia is a bright and exuberant British woman who works in a senior role as a civil servant. The couple met whilst working overseas and lived as expatriates for several years before returning to the UK to be closer to their relatives when they started their family. Now, they live in London with their two sons, aged five and two, and Amir and Amelia use their hybrid working arrangements to manage the demands of their professional and family lives. Their story reflects a trend among the hybrid working middle-class professionals in this study who manage to share the visible load of day-to-day care more equally, while reproducing hidden gendered dynamics beneath the surface.

Both Amelia and Amir have experimented with various working patterns since having children. Currently, Amelia works full-time compressed hours – a 37-hour week where she finishes at midday on a Tuesday to collect her youngest from nursery. She is required in the office two days per week and works at home otherwise. To balance the earlier finish on Tuesdays, she works two evenings and two early mornings a week, and she notes appreciatively that the civil service is open-minded to alternative working patterns. Amir works full-time hours, predominantly from home, with the expectation that he visits the office at least once per week. At his previous company, Amir tells me, “It was a challenge” to achieve the flexibility he desired, leading him to seek new employment: “it was a choice for me to want to be around for the drop off and the pick-ups”. Similarly, Amelia tells me: “I don’t want to grind five days a week – I want to be able to take my son to school. I want to be able to see a teacher.” The increased prevalence of work from home options, since the COVID-19 pandemic, enabled the couple – like many others – to participate more intensively in the day-to-day care of their children while maintaining full-time careers.

Though they each have space to work from home simultaneously, the couple instead tend to “mix and match” their office and home days, so that one is at home while the other is in the office. Many couples in this study adopt this approach whereby they ‘take turns’, rotating home and office days. They also rely on support from Amelia’s mother and Amir’s father, who each care for their youngest son one day a week to save on expensive nursery fees. Their schedule, enabled by the greater opportunity for flexible working patterns, brings them closer to enacting their shared desire to invest in both their careers *and* be available to their children. Amelia says: “We’ve accepted that we’re both quite ambitious people. Nowadays, people want to meet someone who’s your intellectual equal”. Amir reflects their mutual support for each other’s careers when he says, “My wife has got a senior position in her role, so we agreed that I’d try to find more flexible hours”. In addition to wanting to “be around” his children, Amir adopted greater flexibility so that his wife could avoid scaling back her hours for childcare, which could harm her career progression prospects – a socioeconomic dynamic known as the motherhood penalty (Budig and England 2001). Their dual-hybrid working pattern enables Amelia, as an “ambitious person”, to continue pursuing her senior career in the civil service whilst also being able to, for example, “see a teacher”.

Amir and Amelia also describe using their hybrid working arrangements to allow both to “evenly” contribute to everyday childcare tasks like school drop-offs. Their account mirrors broader patterns that show increasing father participation in physical household and care labour in recent years (Altintas and Sullivan 2017). Amir discusses his love of cooking and of experimenting with different spices and new flavours, which he enjoys introducing his children to. As with many other couples I interviewed with “mix and match” arrangements, the person working from home tends to take on the bulk of the everyday routine “family work” (Erickson 2019), such as loading the dishwasher and taking the children to school – the day-to-day reproductive labour that is essential for family life.

“It [the housework] kind of naturally falls into a rhythm depending on whoever’s home most,” Amir tells me, “And because we’re both at home relatively evenly, we find there’s a natural organic split that works most of the time”. Amir and Amelia’s days typically start by waking children, getting them ready for school, nursery, or one of their grandparents’ houses with breakfasts. The person working from home will drop the children off before returning home to work. “I normally start at 9:30,” Amir explains, “so that gives me time to whack on the laundry, put dishes in the dishwasher, take them out, do the household errands I wouldn’t normally be able to do... I love that I can do housework in between work so that whenever my wife and I get home, whoever’s in the office doesn’t come back to an absolute state because two kids are *messy*.”

While Amir characterises their division of household labour as “natural”, it requires effort in its execution. In fact, their individualised, hybrid working arrangements intensify the need for Amir and Amelia to engage in coordination and collaboration to manage childcare. I describe this coordination as coordinative labour, and it is particularly significant in hybrid working cultures. As part of their coordinative labour, the couple have weekly check ins to plan their schedules, align their electronic calendars, and prepare for the week ahead, as well as communicating about their schedules on an ad hoc basis via messaging services such as WhatsApp. In her comparative ethnography of middle- and working-class families in the US, Lareau (2003) describes the family calendar, used to plan the frenetic pace of enriching activities for children, as the “hearth” of the middle-class home. In the hybrid home, the hearth is kept in each parent’s pocket on their mobile device, and expands to include the coordination of not only children’s afterschool clubs, but the individualised working schedules of both parents.

As I will explore throughout this chapter, coordinative labour falls predominantly to Amelia, which she often completes at the same time as her paid work. This echoes wider patterns in their division of certain housework tasks which, despite their commitment to partnership and even participation in day-to-day tasks, follows a gendered pattern of allocation. For example, Amir manages the typically male-coded tasks of car maintenance, insurance, and taking the bins out. Conversely, Amelia is responsible for the female-typed labour of household planning and organisation – the cognitive labour of the home (Daminger 2019). Talking about an upcoming holiday, which has been planned and packed for by Amelia, Amir tells me that he will reciprocate by doing all the driving. “I’m not very good at packing,” he tells me, “I always leave it to the last minute. But my wife is a *very* meticulous planner. We’re going away this weekend, and she’s already started packing from Tuesday. We’re just different in that way. But I’ll be doing the driving, for example.” That Amelia, as the mother, takes on this responsibility exemplifies how the invisible cognitive work of household management remains feminised, sustained by the moral logic of intensive motherhood which naturalises women’s capacity and obligation to continuously hold the needs of her family in her mind (Hays 1996, Daminger 2019). As Daminger (2025) finds, many couples who express gender egalitarian views rationalise their apparently contradictory uneven division of

cognitive labour by appealing to “personal essentialism” – that it is an individual’s nature, rather than their gender identity, that drives who does the thinking work.

Yet when I discuss the gendered division of the cognitive labour with Amelia, she questions how organic or natural these dynamics are. Her questions begin to unveil how the increased parental presence in the home has different meanings and consequences for men and women. While increased presence can lead to a more equitable division of the visible labour, such as the school runs, the cleaning, the cooking, as well as enabling parents to spend more time with their children overall, it does not necessarily reduce the cognitive caregiving load experienced by mothers. Instead, increased presence can actually amplify the expectation that they use their proximity to children and the home to be cognitively and emotionally available to others, contributing to intensified expectations that they ‘do it all’ – be a full-time worker and intensive mother – and the increased flexibility in working hours and location generates the need and conditions for specific forms of coordinative labour.

“I often think, does he default this stuff to me because I do it, and do I do it because my mum did it? What is the actual dynamic of making me be the one that invariably folds the clothes and puts them away, whereas he will do a lot of washing? I wonder if it’s a technical thing, like he will put the clothes in the machine... And like packing for holidays – I packed for the whole family, packed for myself, which I remember seeing from my parents and thinking – I’m going to be a working mum, I’m not going to be like my mum. But then I end up doing 80% of the mental load stuff.”

This snapshot into Amir and Amelia’s hybrid life illustrates a common theme across many couples I interviewed: hybrid work facilitates greater parental presence at home and a more visible sharing of everyday tasks. Yet beneath the surface, many women continue to carry the “load” of family life. Amelia’s reflection reveals the tension many mothers experienced: striving to be an ‘equal partner’, a full-time worker, and a ‘working mum,’ yet feeling pulled into the same invisible, organisational responsibilities their own mothers bore. These responsibilities evolve as parents’ working patterns become increasingly individualised and, at times, unpredictable. Despite the demands of her senior government role, Amelia continues to take primary responsibility for tasks that require her to consistently predict and hold the needs of the family in mind. While the organisation of hybrid working arrangements extends the spatial and temporal boundaries of where both care and paid work can take place, it does not automatically unsettle entrenched normative gendered expectations that position mothers as ultimately accountable for the organisation of family life. Instead, for many women, the material and digital organisation of hybrid work expands the possibilities of how many roles and responsibilities they were able to juggle.

The engaged dad

Conversely, Amir’s “choice to want to be around” reflects what has been described as the new, involved model of fatherhood (Dermott 2014; Faircloth 2023). Within this model, fathers are increasingly co-opted into the middle-class expectations of intensive parenting, and ‘good’ fathering is seen as being involved with and emotionally present for the children (Faircloth 2014). Studies have noted how the image of the involved dad is appealing to middle-class men who wish to engage with their children more than previous generations did (Dermott 2014; Messner 1993). The fathers in this study certainly saw themselves as part of a generational change, away from the breadwinner-homemaker model that typically assigns men the emotionally and physically absent role of economic provider.

For instance, Dan, the co-founder of a market research app and father of two daughters, explains: “As a parent, I massively appreciate how much more time I have with my kids. I’m around in a way my father wasn’t. He used to leave for the office at seven in the morning and come back at seven at night. But I’m around, I do school pickups, school drop-off. We split that between me and my wife. The kids see a lot of me.” Another father, Max, tells me, “I don’t look back and go, oh, it was so nice, my dad was always there. I don’t have that warm and fuzzy feeling. But I enjoy being with my kids. For me, it’s like – what’s the point of having kids and not being with them?” Unlike Amelia, who feels unsuccessful in shaking off the responsibility for the “mental load stuff” she observed her mother do, men like Dan and Max view themselves as part of a new, modern cohort of emotionally and physically present fathers.

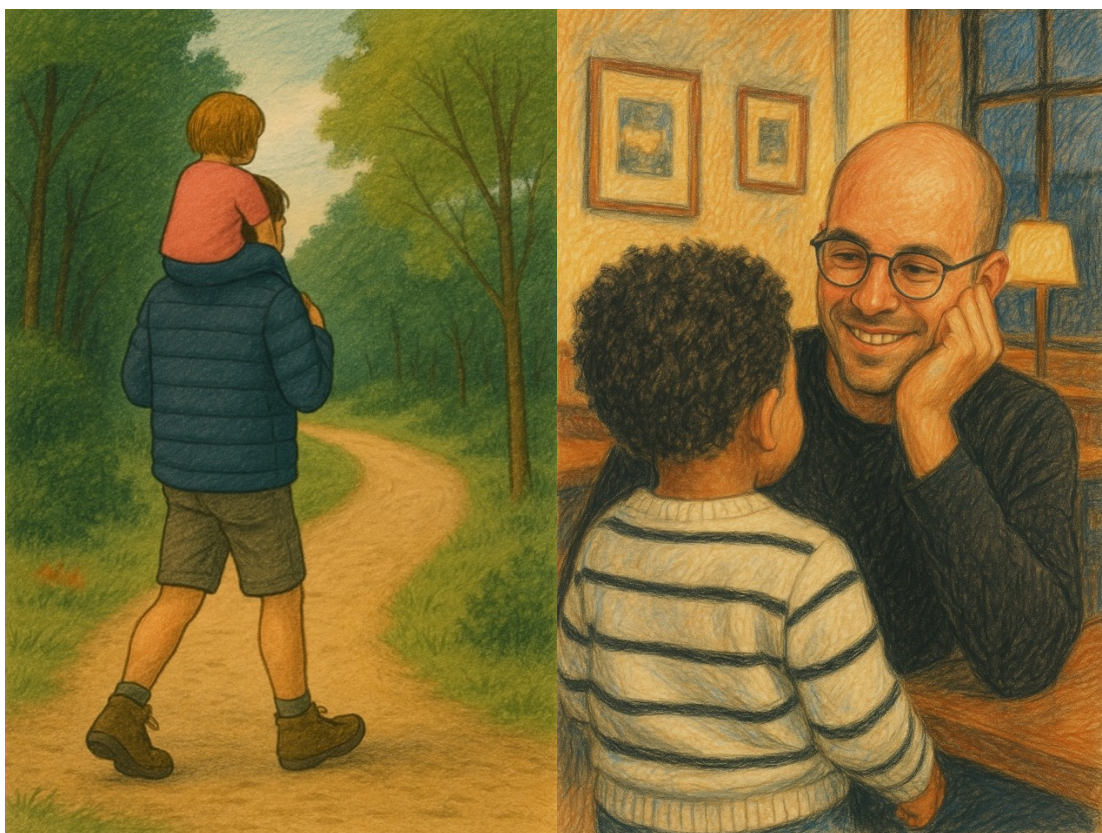


Figure 18: Fathers aim to cultivate quality time and emotional bonds with children. Note: These images are AI-generated using ChatGPT, based on photos uploaded by women participating in the diary study, to maintain anonymity. In these photos, the mothers remain invisible, hidden behind the camera.

Much of the previous literature has charted the gap between these widely shared ideals of new fatherhood and men's actual participation in childcare, finding that new masculinities play an important role in increasing fathers' engagement in emotional engagement and parental responsibility but not in routine care (Faircloth 2023; Offer and Kaplan 2021). Furthermore, Wall and Arnold (2007) note that despite popular cultural representations of involved fatherhood, mothers continue to be positioned as primary parents, whose relationship with children is more important than the fathers. Offer and Kaplan's (2021) study finds that the domain of routine care is sensitive to the father and mother's job constraints, and that most men continue to prioritize work over family. They suggest that new fathers may adjust their domestic role by adding childcare, but do not adjust their working hours or role. Amir and Amelia's case builds on these findings by demonstrating that when granted greater latitude over their working arrangements, Amir does choose to prioritize routine care of children and the home by moving to a job with greater flexibility. However, Amelia's reflection brings to light the gendered invisible labour that endures and becomes reconfigured amid these shifts.

How Hybrid Work Requires Coordinative Labour at Home

As Amelia and Amir's example highlights, the women in this study often remained primarily responsible for the planning and coordination of family life in the dual-hybrid households. In the following section, I adopt a sociomaterial lens (Orlikowski 2007) to highlight how hybrid work does not necessarily reduce this labour but can in fact intensify it in new ways. Hybrid work can intensify the labour of coordinating family life by requiring greater amounts of temporal and spatial coordination across family members. This is work that women frequently describe as a "mental load" (Dean et al. 2022), which reflects their affective experience of stress and overwhelm. Further, I argue that the digital technologies used to manage work and care play a key role in constituting a dense and fragmented experience of time for women, even as they enable greater access to professional opportunities.

Planning meetings: Temporal and spatial coordination

As Lareau's (2004) work on middle-class families indicates, the need to coordinate the life of the family predates the pandemic. However, in hybrid households, where care and professional tasks are fragmented across personalised and increasingly autonomous schedules and couples "mix and match" their schedules, the need to align, negotiate, schedule and reschedule becomes increasingly central. In this context, coordination expands to include the schedules of not only children, but spouses too. These temporal negotiations are closely bound up with spatial coordination, including decisions about presence, availability, and responsibility across and between sites of work and care. Hybrid working households rely on devices, platforms, digital systems, plus analogue tools like family calendars, to manage care and work; coordinating multiple individual spatio-temporal schedules emerges as a key mode

of organising both domestic and professional life. Mothers, more often than fathers, are primarily responsible for using, updating, optimising, and interpreting these organisational tools to synchronise care with their own and their partner's schedule, though as I explore later in the chapter, some parents experiment with both technology and their schedules to redistribute the load. I conceptualise these practices as coordinative labour: the sociomaterial work of aligning the temporal, spatial, and emotional demands of work and care under hybrid arrangements.

Though coordination has been described elsewhere as “managerial labour” (Wayne et al. 2023), and may partially overlap with Daminger's (2019) sub-categories of cognitive labour ‘anticipation’ and ‘monitoring’, my proposed concept of coordinative labour, which provides a lens to analyse the temporal and spatial demands and emotional quality of flexibly managing work and care, often via digital devices, unifies and extends these ideas. Coordinative labour is especially salient in the hybrid context because people's schedules are increasingly untethered from “collective rhythms” (Southerton and Tomlinson 2005)—the institutionalised temporal patterns that once structured daily life—and instead require the continual negotiation of individually organised temporalities and leaky boundaries. Whereas Daminger's model assumes bounded households with relatively stable routines and face-to-face coordination, coordinative labour captures the post-pandemic ecology in which the temporal and spatial disembedding of work generates a need to align multiple asynchronous temporalities and localities, which is often mediated through mixed modalities: digital systems and anchors, ad hoc communications, and face-to-face organisation.

Weekly meetings

Weekly meetings are the common site for couples to plan their care responsibilities. Elizabeth and Edward, a professional dual-earning couple with one young son and a son from Edward's previous relationship, describe running their household “like a business”. After running into ongoing logistical issues where they struggled to find care for their son, Edward explained that he had wondered: “Why doesn't that happen very often at work? Oh – it's because we proactively manage the diaries in advance.” Elizabeth and Edward therefore set a regular time to meet and divide caregiving responsibilities in a way that aligns with their working schedules, which they enter into their digital calendars. Edward explained: “We have a weekly meeting on a Monday, which is like what I'd have with my PA [personal assistant] where we talk about diaries and what's coming up, what we've got planned in, who's doing what, and who we need help from.”

“It'll be a case of, ok, our son's got these events, these are his clubs,” Elizabeth confirms. “Edward will go into his calendar and say, well, I need to be somewhere else this evening, or I've got a call that day. I might not get back for bedtime. So, we do it that way. We also do general house stuff, about finances or other events like birthday parties.” On the surface, their system appears to be an egalitarian approach to the division of coordinative labour where

they attempt to “re-institutionalise” a shared, albeit smaller scale, collective rhythm to mitigate the issues that arise from individualised schedules, enabling both to equally participate in the labour market and childrearing. However, upon further probing, Elizabeth explains that it is she who has driven the formation of these weekly planning meetings due to her dissatisfaction with their previous allocation of coordinative labour, and her difficulties in bringing him along in the planning process. The analogy Edward draws between his meetings with Elizabeth and the meetings he has with his personal assistant is revealing of this power imbalance. Elizabeth told me:

“I’ve tried talking to him [Edward] as things come up and that doesn’t work because it doesn’t go in because he’s not focused on it. I’ve tried adding things to the calendar, just adding them and not mentioning it, but he doesn’t check the calendar. I’ve tried speaking to him about it in person then following up on WhatsApp, so he’s had it in person and in writing, so he’s got a reference – that doesn’t work. Those are the strategies I’ve tried. This sit down, undivided attention for however long, half an hour, seems to be the only way to get that sorted. I’m much longer term thinking and Edward’s very much whatever is in front of him right now, just personality wise.”

Though these planning meetings share the coordinative labour of decision-making about scheduling of childcare and other home-related topics across the couple, the planning meeting’s origin story reveals the hidden labour that goes into the very efforts to share it. Furthermore, Elizabeth’s description of her various strategies – spoken requests, calendar updates, WhatsApp reminders – highlights the situated and gendered nature of technology use, where the responsibility for checking care-related calendars and notifications is unevenly shared. For women in many of these dual-earning, dual-hybrid couples, their flexible working schedules generated the need to coordinate not only their child’s care around their working time, but also to manage their partner’s schedule, and how this schedule intersects with care. As well as facilitating women’s ability to work full-time by coordinating care across two individualised working schedules, coordinative labour amongst hybrid workers often facilitates the greater male participation in the routine care of children.

Smiling sardonically, Elizabeth tells me about her recent birthday where Edward gave her a card he designed with the phrases and quotes they share as a couple. One of these was: ‘Is it in the calendar?’. Despite their planning meetings, she tells me that she often still receives a text from Edward to say: “Has [our son] got PE today?”. For Elizabeth, this adds to her mounting sense of overload: “I’m like, I’m already doing everything I possibly can to make you notice this.” As Elizabeth attempts to create shared, digitally-mediated systems in a context of increasingly flexible and individuated schedules, she also performs the labour of managing not only their schedules, but her partner’s participation in them, reminding him where he needs to be and when. Feminised coordinative labour underpins the ability of men to enact the model of ‘involved fatherhood’. As she explained, aligning Edward’s schedule with their son’s schedule was not only to allow her to work, but for “[my son’s] sake. It’s just

a reminder to him that it would be nice if you could take him to this club not for my sake, but for his sake.” This reveals the additional layer of emotional labour at play in this dynamic, where coordinating time for her son to spend with her partner is framed in terms of its emotional impact on her son.

While the act of ‘treating it like a business’ appears to formalise shared responsibility, it masks the labour of initiating and maintaining these systems. That this labour is performed by the person – in this case, Elizabeth – seeking to make the relationship more balanced indicates that this division of coordinative labour is about power. According to Graeber (2012), structural inequality creates “highly lopsided structures of imagination” (p118). Within relations of domination and subjugation, the subordinated party are effectively expected to understand how the relations in question work, creating a pattern of “sympathetic identification” (ibid) where the subordinated have no choice but to comprehend the choices, rationale, and behaviour of the dominating party.

Graeber highlights patriarchal arrangements as a prime example of structural violence¹², noting the constant efforts of women to manage, maintain, and adjust the “egos of men”. He calls this imaginative identification ‘interpretive labour’ to highlight the work involved in understanding the dominating party’s point of view. This work is evident in Elizabeth’s explanation of her attempts to share the coordinative load. Building an effective system required Elizabeth to first understand what kinds of conditions were required for Edward to be able to focus and plan, because the digital tools that enable collaboration and communication were ignored by Edward. More broadly, assuming responsibility for coordinative labour stems from the expectation that women be continually monitoring and evaluating the logistical elements of daily life, and interpreting how these elements might impact their children and partners, revealing how the uneven distribution of coordinative labour underpins the persistent experience of stress, resentment, and a mental load for women in hybrid households.

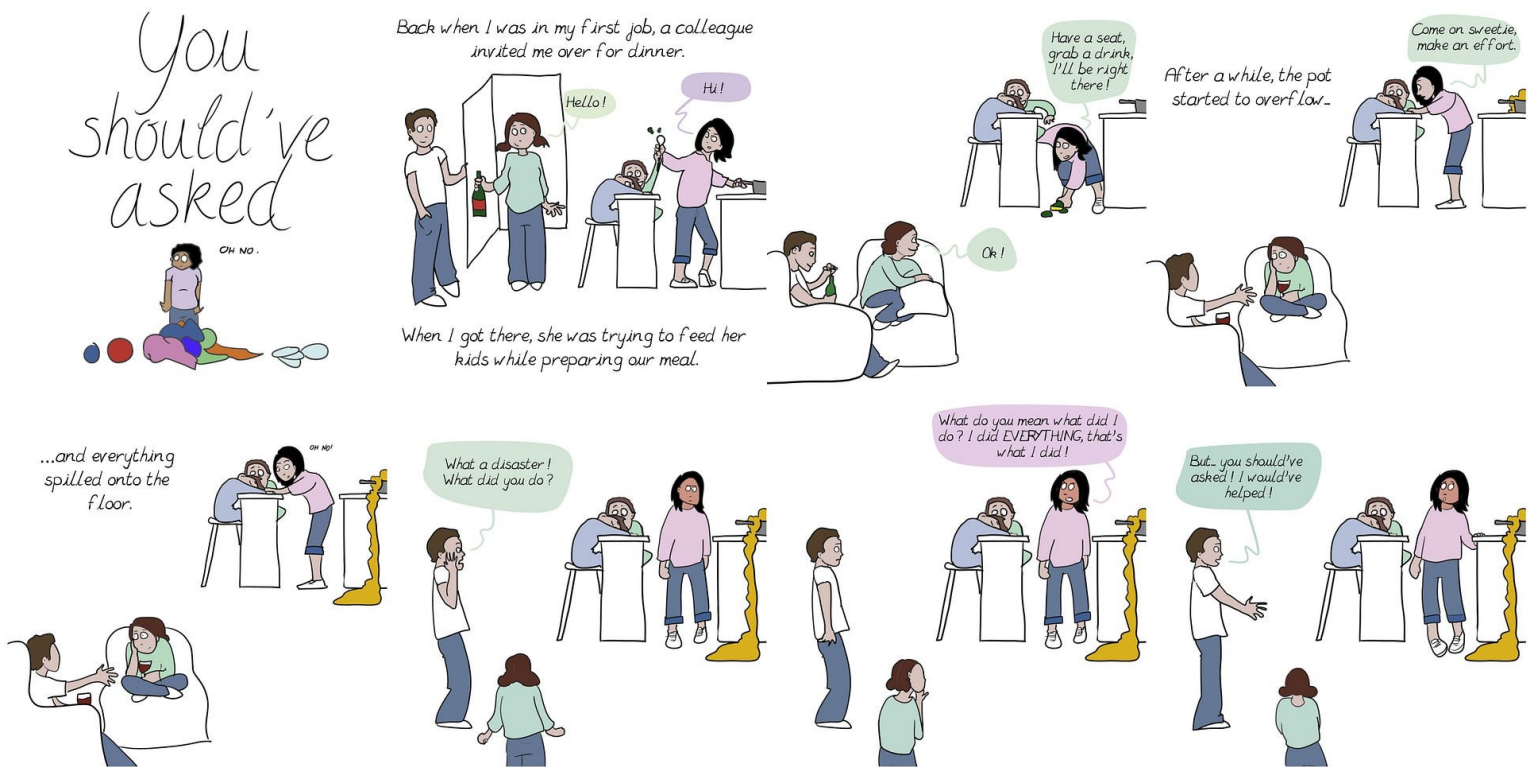
A note on the mental load

As noted in my Literature Review, scholars of domestic labour have increasingly begun to focus on its mental or cognitive dimension. Difficult to quantify or track via traditional time-use methods due to its intangible and diffuse nature, the cognitive dimension of household work is the scheduling, planning, and organising of family life (Daminger 2019; Weeks and Ruppner 2024). In Daminger’s (2019) definition, she draws a distinction between cognitive labour and emotional labour in the home. Yet, as became apparent in my conversations with

¹² Graeber defines structural violence not as the occasional, spectacular acts of violence, but as mundane yet omnipresent forms of structural violence that define the conditions of our social existence. It is not the actual violence but the threat of violence that is important in his definition, because the fear of harm materializes relations of power into existence. Though in this instance, Elizabeth may not feel any immediate threat of physical danger, she experiences a fear of what may happen to the maintenance and wellbeing of the household if such scheduling is not completed. Furthermore, if care is not arranged, she may have to flex her own schedule around the needs of her child, resulting in economic loss.

hybrid working women, thinking about the care of children was very often bound up in a consideration of how the child might emotionally respond to that care. In the following discussion, I draw from Dean, Churchill, and Ruppner's (2022) conceptualisation of the mental load as the layering of cognitive and emotional labour. I consider coordinative labour as a layered cognitive and emotional load that involves ongoing temporal and spatial coordination across work and care.

Figure 19 'You should've asked' Comic strip from 'The Mental Load' (Emma 2018)



The concept of the mental load first rose to prominence in a feminist comic that went viral in 2017 – see Figure 19. Since then, the notion of the mental load has garnered attention in the media and given rise to multiple self-help books and guides – some, like *Fair Play* (Rodsky 2019) targeted at helping couples achieve an equal division of invisible labour, and others, like *The Organised Mum Method* (Bray 2019) are explicitly aimed at mothers. As noted by Amelia, “There’s this thing called The Organised Mum Method, and they’re not even shy about the fact that it’s literally mums who do all this stuff, so let’s make a method for them.” Therefore, though the concept is being increasingly theorized and measured by scholars, it also emerged in a vernacular way from the women in this study. The vernacular use of the women of the term ‘mental load’ richly captures the felt sense shared by women of the dense

and overwhelming quality of layered responsibilities for the home. For example, Lucy and her husband both work from home regularly. She described the “mother load” she carries—even in a relationship she described as “50-50” in terms of housework and childcare:

“They call it the mother load, or the mental load. And it is that, you know, we are equal, but there are things that I just don't think they notice, or care about quite as much. I'll notice that the cupboards are getting bare, and then even though he cooks and he'll do it, it's on me to say we need to do some shopping and we need to order the food. I just don't think they notice or care quite as much.

It's like, you're in work and you think *shit*, I've got to put the food order through, and then you might not do it and suddenly it's half nine at night and you're meant to be relaxing, or you're getting messages from class WhatsApp groups pinging away and it's non-uniform day tomorrow or the bake sale or it's so-and-so's birthday weekend so I need to buy them a present. Like he [my husband] can wrap it, but it's just carrying that weight. It's exhausting, even if they're physically there doing everything, it's the additional mental load.”

As Lucy explains, the mental load is not only noticing, but *caring*. Despite the physical support offered by her husband, she carries the mental load of being ultimately responsible for anticipating, monitoring, and caring. She alone feels responsible for selecting a suitable gift for a children's birthday party – a task that goes beyond purely cognitive tasks such as remembering the date and assessing options for gifts, but includes the emotion work of considering (even if it is briefly) what that child may like, what is suitable for that child's age, and ensuring the gift is purchased and brought to the event to avoid a social faux pas that may reflect negatively on her and her child. Though her husband may save her ten minutes by wrapping the gift, Lucy remains responsible for the dense and diffuse labour of thinking and caring, and the centre of an always-on digitalised environment of reminders. As a plethora of feminist analysis has found (e.g. Hays 1996, Williams 2001), good mothers are culturally constructed as devoted to their child's wellbeing and development, and thus caring through planning may be another way for mothers to “do gender” – perform their normative gender role – amid shifting fatherhood roles (Weeks and Ruppner 2024; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Digital coordination: Blurred boundaries and digitally layered labour

The coordination of paid work and domestic responsibilities intertwines on digital devices. Lucy uses her phone to order groceries, to receive work-related emails, and to check messages from Mum's WhatsApp groups, while her husband may forget to check if there is food in the cupboards. Similarly, Tara, a mother of two young daughters employed as a research manager, set up alerts on the second-hand clothing app Vinted to notify her of newly uploaded children's clothes – she prefers to buy them second-hand. She keeps her phone next to her laptop whilst working at home and, when notifications pop up, she might pause to

check them. Her husband, Tom, admits during our interview that he does not do as much thinking ahead as Tara, and instead is responsible for maintaining household appliances, their mountain bikes, and their house renovations. These tasks are spatially and temporally bounded, contrasting with Tara's ongoing list. Digital infrastructures and shifting work arrangements enable women to perform both care-related and paid work tasks through the same devices. These activities increasingly occur at the same time, in the same place. Productive and reproductive labour converge into the same material moment, reconfiguring the spatial division of work and family that domesticity prescribes. In this way, digital technologies do not simply facilitate the management of work and care, but constitute coordinative labour by making simultaneity, interruption, and ongoing availability central to how family life is sustained under hybrid work.

Practices such as setting digital notifications and alerts may be intended to lighten the mental load by using the app's affordances to do some of the "monitoring" work. However, these digital features do not unsettle the undergirding assumption that women manage the home and hold overall responsibility for the coordination of their child's schedule. Instead, notifications to do with the management and organisation of family life often impinge upon women's leisure and work time and create an always-on environment of reminders. Describing the benefits of working from home, one woman told me: "I'm telling you this because it's confidential, right, but I can have my personal email account open while I've got my work one because school emails and forms need signing off – rather than, you know, it all flooding in at 6, 7pm at the end of the day when I was already overloaded." While hybrid work enables women to enact caregiving responsibilities that might have previously been constrained by office-based visibility norms, it also deepens the entanglement of care and paid work. Digital infrastructures reconfigure the temporal and emotional demands of managing work and care by embedding domestic coordination into the technological landscape of hybrid working.

In an always-on, digital society, the ability to manage blurred boundaries between work and life requires what Ollier-Malaterre, Jacobs, and Rothbard (2019) call digital cultural capital—the skills and dispositions needed to navigate digital systems and manage boundaries. However, they note that these capacities are unequally distributed, often shaped by gender, class, and professional role. Ollier-Malaterre et al note that the dominant groups in a society develop a specific digital habitus that advantages them over other groups, such as elite classes who cultivate practices of disconnection in digital detox retreats. In the hybrid work context, the home becomes a gendered site of temporal and technological density (Wajcman 2015) comprised of multiple overlapping obligations to do with paid and unpaid labour, emotional attachments, and time-pressure, felt acutely by women due to the expectation that they be accountable for the organisation of family life. It is not that these professional, highly educated women lack the skills, capital, or knowledge to disconnect, but that the multiple, intersecting roles of worker and mother compete with the capacity to disconnect or to actively

manage the boundaries between those roles. Amelia illustrates this density when describing how she booked an after-school club for her son during a work presentation:

“Even today I was giving a presentation at work at 1PM, but this morning at 9AM, the school emailed us and said the clubs for next term will be released at 1:00 PM today. There are *minutes* to get those clubs and we don't have any afterschool childcare on a Monday, so we *have* to get the Monday Club, whatever it is. I managed to get the club - even though I'm giving a presentation, I'm sitting there trying to get the pissing club, refreshing the page over and over, so that he doesn't do loads and loads of the other afterschool club, which is a bit boring because it's just playing games in the hall.”

Amelia's ability to layer organisational childcare tasks with work is facilitated by technology, which affords her the discretion to do both simultaneously. She manages not only to deliver a presentation and book her child's afterschool care, but to book a club that he will not find boring. Though supported in her aspirations to be an engaged parent and a full-time worker by hybrid work, this experience highlights the paradox of technologically mediated, hybrid arrangements. The capacity to do both tasks simultaneously becomes the condition in which the expectation to do both paid work and coordinative care tasks intensifies. The impossibility of disconnecting is evident in Amelia's experience of juggling caregiving logistics mid-presentation, which represents a moment where digital obligations to family and paid work collide and compress. Amelia explains that though Amir is included on the school's emails, she does not trust that he will appreciate the urgency of the task and feels responsible for completing it. In any case, she tells me that Amir does not even have the details to access the school log-in portal¹³. The assumption of Amelia's responsibility for various forms of labour during work time by not only the workplace but the school and the couple's division of labour produces a “denser” (Wajcman 2015) experience of time for Amelia, indicating that her time is unprotected from technological interruptions to do with care. In the hybrid, working-from-home context, the mental load is not just heavier, but more compressed, simultaneous, and digitally mediated.

Cognitive labour is typically framed within current literature as ‘held inside women's heads’, as a never-ending to-do list that is contained within and managed by individual women and, occasionally, by men (Daminger 2019; Petts, Carlson, and Wong 2025; Wayne et al. 2023; Weeks and Ruppanner 2024). Yet what becomes evident in considering how hybrid working women experience their care and paid labour as a ‘load’ of layered tasks is that this labour is a sociomaterial practice, entangled with digital and material artefacts that are both personal and interpersonal. A sociomaterial lens thus highlights how “organizing is bound up with the material forms and spaces through which humans interact,” (Orlikowski 2007). This is one crucial way my proposed concept of coordinative labour builds on current definitions of cognitive labour.

¹³ In Chapter 6, I explore how the digital systems such as the afterschool booking portal reproduce gendered divisions of labour.

Consider Lucy's Mum's WhatsApp messaging groups and Amelia's Teams video conference and school booking platform. These material forms co-construct the way social dynamics are organised and experienced. Framing these practices as sociomaterial therefore reorients attention from what women must plan and remember, to how technologies, spaces, and relationships collectively enable and sustain the ongoing organisation of family life. As pointed out by Daminger (2019) and Dean, Churchill, and Ruppner (2022), cognitive labour intersected with work prior to the pandemic, and parents surely checked their phone for notifications during the working day in the office. Yet with the rise of working from home, the sociomaterial entanglement of these forms of labour deepens, and the home and its digital infrastructure provides the site where cognitive, emotional, and productive demands are co-constituted. Notifications, devices, and apps mediate women's labour across domains, binding together waged work and domestic coordination into a continuous temporal and material field.

The tools used by women to manage the organisation of care are not neutral reflections or mediators of pre-existing internal dynamics and processes. I propose that the form, intensity, and temporality of their coordinative labour emerge from the entanglement between digital technologies used for work-family coordination and gender norms. Digital technologies do not simply facilitate work at home - they enable the layered, always-on nature of working from home, collapsing work and care into the same moment through their affordances, and thus reconfiguring the possible limits for how work and care can and should take place. Crucially, Orlikowski emphasizes that the specific design of the technology is not the determining force for how practice takes shape. Instead, the sociomaterial approach emphasizes how emergent dynamics are neither socially *nor* technologically determined – they are “constitutively entangled” (ibid), meaning that the social and the material mutually shape each other. In other words, the experience of a digitally-enabled ‘load’ is not a guaranteed outcome of the technology that enables it. Instead, it emerges from the way that the shifting material conditions of work that engender greater flexibility meet the normative, embedded gendered expectations of motherhood and fatherhood. As I will explore in following sections, fathers did not experience the same load as mothers.

Ultimately, the load experienced by women like Amelia, Tara, and Lucy is not only organised via digital technology, but normatively configured through this sociomaterial context. Digital tools that enable remote coordination intersect with the culture of intensive mothering, generating an always-on environment that both expects and enables the compression of work and care into the same space and time. The norms that shape how paid work and care are managed by women are reformatted in the work from home context, which alters expectations of when and how the organisation of care can layer with paid work. Dean, Ruppner, and Churchill (2022) highlight how the mental load is the simultaneous management of emotional and cognitive labour. My findings extend this by demonstrating how, by relying on digital technologies for simultaneity, women often layer emotional and

cognitive labour with paid work, amplifying the load for hybrid working women. These digitally mediated practices culminate in what I conceptualise as coordinative labour: the ongoing, gendered work of aligning the asynchronous temporalities and spatialities of paid and unpaid life as they are produced through the technologies of hybrid work.

Mum's WhatsApp groups: Gendered expectations, digital organisation

Efforts made by couples to more evenly share the responsibility for coordinating family with professional life can be constrained by social dynamics beyond the household that are materialised through digital platforms. Mum's WhatsApp groups are informally run, digital spaces where mothers of children at the same school share school updates and reminders, coordinate social occasions such as children's birthday parties, and organise the details of family life and childcare. Women described them as double-edged swords: they offer a vital social and informational space for parental support and help mothers to remember important school events, like the bake sale that their child is expected to contribute to, or events such as World Book Day that require a costume. Simultaneously, they contribute to an overwhelming number of notifications, adding to the mental load experienced by women who are expected to manage and respond to the messages, reinforcing the association of mothers with family organisation. "They're awful," Lucy said frankly. "They never stop going." The affordances of WhatsApp, such as the constant "pinging" of push notifications and the instantaneity of messages, produce a continuous mode of coordination that expects constant availability.

Theoretically, WhatsApp groups could be used to support more egalitarian forms of communication and collaboration by enabling both men and women to join and exchange information used to organise family life. However, in practice, Mum's WhatsApp groups crystallise the normative expectation that it is mothers who will manage the organisation of family life, while also constituting the form and temporality of that organisation. This is illustrated by the experience of an outlier couple within my sample, whose division of care responsibilities reversed conventional gender expectations and those observed in most other couples in the sample. Asher, father of two, identifies himself as the "primary caregiver" for his two sons. As a result, Asher is also responsible for most of the tasks associated with domestic and cognitive labour, such as ensuring the children's uniforms are ready the night before, helping them to pack their school bags, keeping on top of homework, planning out healthy meals for his children, placing the online grocery order, and arranging carpooling for his and his neighbour's children. Yet though Asher and his wife defy stereotyped roles and responsibilities at home, he finds himself an outsider in his school's mums' WhatsApp groups. Asher explained:

"There is a WhatsApp group for my eldest's year group of mums. Emma [Asher's wife] is on that, because I'm not allowed to be on that, because it's just the mums. So, she has to forward me all the logistical things that come up."

Similarly, Max, who adopts a mix and match approach to work and care with his wife, told me: “It’s like an unwritten rule, but only the mums are on the WhatsApp group, which really irks me, because sometimes some kids come home with homework and some kids don’t. What homework am I doing? And I have to wait for my wife to go on the group to get the response to come back to me. That drives me bananas.”

Max and Asher’s experiences suggest that even among the couples in this study who attempted to share or split coordinative labour in non-normative ways, its organisation remains shaped via sociomaterial arrangements beyond the household. Though the digital features of a WhatsApp group enable rapid and collaborative coordination for a group of users, the widely held, normative expectation that mothers be the logistical and emotional managers of the home creates a sociomaterial entanglement that both enacts and amplifies the mental load experienced by women and excludes men like Asher and Max from participating directly in school-related coordination.¹⁴ In binding together gendered expectations and digital infrastructure into a continuous flow of filtering and responding to messages, Mum’s WhatsApp groups demonstrate how coordinative labour is a sociomaterial practice through which the ongoing organisation of family life is continuously gendered.

¹⁴ Given that only two men reported these experiences, it is worth noting that – like other collaborative digital systems like calendar apps and after-school booking apps – there is an opportunity for these spaces to be used for the egalitarian distribution of reminders and information amongst both mothers and fathers, and that there may be examples of this elsewhere.

The Open and Closed Door: How Hybrid Work Reconfigures Emotional Labour

Building on the previous section's sociomaterial analysis of the temporal and spatial dimensions of coordinative labour, this section turns to the emotional outcomes that arise out of the spatio-temporal collision of work and care. Through the vignette of David and Diana, a couple who both work remotely, I show how women like Diana often experience heightened guilt and a porous blending of work and care when working from home, while men like David can enact firmer boundaries while still fulfilling the 'involved dad' ideal. Extending the previous section's discussion of coordinative labour, I argue that the gendered management of presence and availability in the home highlights how hybrid work arrangements reproduce unequal emotional burdens between men and women due to their ongoing role as emotional and logistic manager of the home. Beyond the digital tools used in the previous examples, the spatial context of the home intersects with gendered norms that place the emotional responsibility for care on women. Material boundaries like the home office door are engaged with in distinct ways by mothers and fathers, acting as a sociomaterial infrastructure that reinforce and co-constitute the uneven distribution of responsibility for care and emotional labour.



Figure 19. AI-generated image of David and Diana, based on a photo uploaded to Diana's diary study. The original photo is a selfie taken by Dan after they had finished jogging together, one of the hobbies that their work-from-home arrangements allow them to engage in more.

At 6:40am at the home of David and Diana, married British tech workers and parents who work remotely from their home in the West Midlands, the sound of Diana's mobile phone alarm sets the morning routine in motion. With three boys aged fourteen, twelve, and five, mornings are a hectic juggling act that require Diana and David to tag-team as they ensure their sons are fed, prepared, and shepherded to school on time. This morning, it is David's turn to begin the morning routine. Whilst David wakes their sons and begins to make the boys' packed lunches in the kitchen, Diana has a few minutes in bed by herself. Taking a sip of the coffee David has brought her, she opens the calendar app on her phone to check on her work calendar for her virtual meetings for the day and the digital family calendar she shares with David. Satisfied that nothing urgent needs attending to, she gets dressed and heads downstairs to take over the morning routine from her husband, who begins his working day earlier than her.

At 7.40am, David goes upstairs to get dressed. Diana gives her middle son his snack and drink to take to school, puts her eldest's packed lunch in his school bag, and convinces her youngest to brush his teeth. Between managing her children's morning routine and eating her own breakfast, she opens her laptop to catch up on emails and get ahead of the upcoming day. At 8.20am, she walks her youngest son to school; a moment of quality time together that she treasures. Afterwards, she rushes home to conduct a job interview at 9am, followed by back-to-back calls until lunch. In his office in a separate room of the house, David is also sitting at his desk as he attends numerous virtual calls with colleagues and clients.

Despite their busy morning routine, David and Diana value their remote working arrangement because it enables them to both rearrange and to gain time. Like Amir and Amelia, they find that when working from home, time is gained back from the commute and can be spent on more time with family; household tasks can be sprinkled throughout the day rather than piled on at the end of the working day, leaving evenings freer for family time and downtime. "Over time, our rhythm has just evolved naturally," David muses. "Every morning, we take turns at who gets up with the kids to make the breakfasts and lunch, and the other person can have five minutes in bed. It's all about working as a partnership."

Yet their experiences of working from home diverge, both in structure and in feeling. David is senior in his part-technical, part-management role as the Head of Development at an IT consulting company, whilst Diana's role as Product Manager is less senior, without management responsibility, and not as well compensated. David must log and bill his hours, which means every minute of his day must be accountable, whereas Diana has a greater degree of autonomy and flexibility around her working hours – giving her, as she describes it, the sense of being trusted to do the work she is paid for without having to be physically present with colleagues and managers. Yet the most significant difference in their experiences is not visible in their schedules or job descriptions, but in the emotional quality of their work-from-home lives.

In September of the previous year, their youngest son began primary school. Rather than being in nursery from eight in the morning to six in the evening, he now finishes school at quarter past three. This shift means that in the afternoons, their five-year-old son is present at home during working hours and, unlike their oldest sons, their youngest son still wants the attention of his parents – to interact and play with them. For Diana, her youngest son’s presence at home during working hours leaves her juggling her maternal obligation to be emotionally and physically present and available to her son, with the trust she feels has been placed in her by her workplace to complete her work independently. Simultaneously, she makes efforts to minimize their reliance on the “electronic nanny” – the TV or the iPad – despite this being, as she admits, the “easy option”. Working from home requires that she juggle the competing expectations about what it means to be a ‘good’ worker and a ‘good’ mother simultaneously and in immediate proximity.

“The overriding thing with the juggling is the guilt. You constantly feel like you're either letting work down or you're letting your kids down. It's really difficult, and it's going to be interesting in the future to see what the emotional impact on children is if more of the workforce become remote workers, because are they going to understand? And this is, obviously, a constant source of guilt for me. Is my son going to understand when he's older that when I was saying, I'm on a meeting, I can't talk to you, that it wasn't personal for him, that had I been in an office, he wouldn't have even had the opportunity to come? Is he going to know that or am I going to have emotionally scarred him for the rest of his life?”

Her response to this guilt and her fears of potential emotional impacts on her child is strategic: she tries to schedule her meetings while her son is at school, allowing her to be more available once he’s home. She leaves her door open to listen out for him and allows him to wander in and out of her office space – a physical enactment of leaky work-life boundaries. Yet despite these solutions, she says:

“There are moments when the mum-guilt takes over. Especially when I say I can’t play or look at something because I’m working. Or I don’t go and see the [older] boys when they get home if I’m on a meeting. Remote working is tough because your kids can see you, and the youngest especially, does not understand that you aren’t really there when you’re working.”

“Mum-guilt” frames Diana’s emotional experience in relation to her gendered role as a mother; no equivalent seemed to exist for fathers. When their youngest son is home, it is not only Diana who is home; David also works from his office. Yet it is only Diana who feels this guilt, and only Diana who has conjured up an ‘open-door’ solution. David takes a different approach. When I ask David how he manages childcare at home alongside his full-time job, he laughs and jokingly says, “Yeah, I just close the door behind me.” Though he delivers this answer with a smile, which leads me to assume that I should take what he says with a grain of salt, the contrast between Diana’s open door and David’s closed one is not merely logistical. It symbolises the division of emotional responsibility and the responsibility

for parental availability. Diana’s door is open not only to her child but to the emotional interruptions of caregiving. David’s, by contrast, remains physically and symbolically closed.

By way of explanation, David describes Diana as being “way more capable”, with “more patience” when it comes to tasks like helping their sons with their homework, whereas he “can’t stand doing that – I did it when I was at school, and I don’t want to do it again.” These dynamics were amplified during the pandemic when Diana opened, in David’s words, “the school of mum”. Yet Diana herself, burdened with this labour whilst working full-time, described herself as having “PTSD. Just even thinking about it nearly brings me to tears”. While David can “close the door”, Diana carries the load of the guilt and the responsibility for care, despite severe consequences for her own wellbeing.

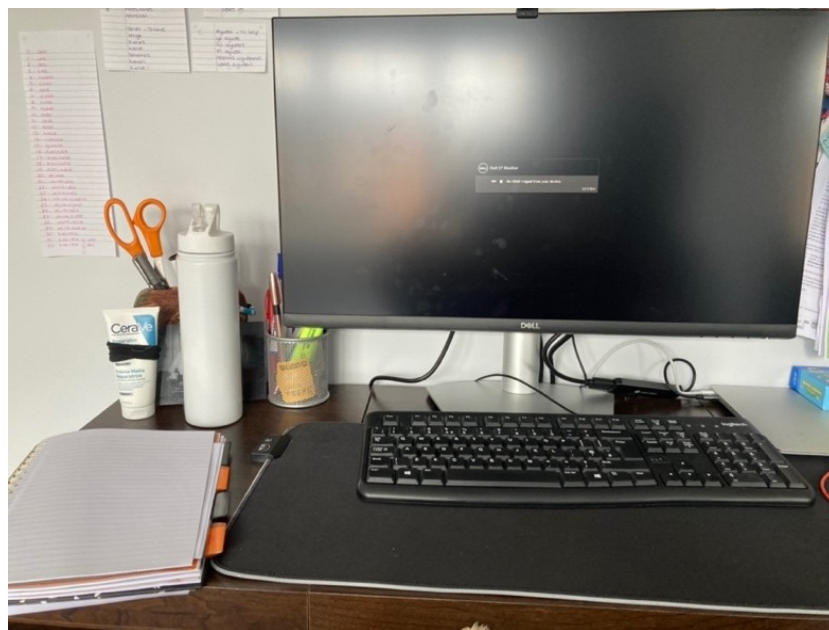


Figure 20. Diana’s desk at home, decorated with a photo of her children (not pictured) and a pinned Spanish vocabulary sheet for their upcoming holiday, where Diana will learn the Spanish words for the foods her children are allergic to. The home office itself is a site of both professional and maternal labour, where even her workspace is co-occupied by reminders of cognitive and emotional tasks, representative of the porous boundaries between work and caregiving.

Diana’s experience illustrates the emotional outcome of the struggle to meet roles in the same time and space. Her guilt is produced through the entanglement of hybrid working arrangements – fragmented temporalities, digital visibility, and the proximity of children – which require her to maintain simultaneous attentiveness to work and care. Her guilt and ongoing primary responsibility reflects the gendered expectation that mothers remain emotionally accessible even when working. The emotions Diana describes are therefore the felt outcome of this coordinative labour, whereas David’s ability to ‘close the door’ demonstrates how sociomaterial boundaries enable some workers, typically fathers, to limit their emotional and spatio-temporal exposure to care. Through this contrast, the vignette shows how hybrid work can intensify gendered patterns of emotional responsibility within the home that are generated by role strain.

Role strain amongst hybrid working mothers

The sense of guilt experienced by mothers when paid work constrains their ability to practise intensive mothering has long been recognised, but in hybrid context it becomes another dimension to manage and coordinate. As Stone (2008) found almost twenty years ago, middle-class professional women opted out of their careers due to the desire to be an influential figure in the child's life, and a lack of access to organisational flexibility. While hybrid work might address temporal issues around organisational flexibility, Diana's mum-guilt indicates how working from home generates emergent forms of worry and guilt to do with emotional attentiveness, rather than physical presence.

In the social study of emotion, guilt is often conceptualised as an internalisation of the sense that one has failed to meet or uphold a social norm (Hochschild 1979). Working at home enables Diana to work full-time *and* drop her children to school; to progress her career in line with dominant worker norms whilst also fulfilling some aspects of the cultural model of intensive motherhood. Yet the collision of work and care amplifies the strain of holding these roles simultaneously, contributing to the sense that even though ostensibly she is able to 'do it all', she can never do enough. The proximity and visibility to her children during the working day when working from home intersects with prevalent gender norms that situate her as the emotional and logistical manager of the household. By being partially attuned to several domains at once, she struggles to meet the idealised standards of any single role.

In contrast, the closed-door strategy employed by David and his notable absence of guilt represents the frictionless nature of his ability to fulfil the roles of involved dad, equal partner, and remote worker. Working from home facilitates his participation of physical and routine acts of caregiving: drop-offs, breakfasts, bringing Diana coffee in bed. Closing the door on caregiving needs during the working day in order to focus on work is representative of David's ability to enact his digital cultural capital that hinges around the ability to actively manage the boundaries between work and life when working from home (Ollier-Malaterre et al. 2019). As I explore in Chapter 6, many couples in this study made decisions that prioritised the male partner's earning power. In this context, David's capacity to physically segment contrasts sharply with the dense and porous physical and technological boundaries experienced by Diana when working from home. Though Diana has the digital cultural capital to know *how* to enact boundaries, she is pulled by the normative context of intensive mothering and the material context of working-from-home into a more porous and integrated mode of managing work and care.

In Daminger's (2019) analysis of cognitive labour, she notes the subtle, male-typed form of power to *not* monitor or anticipate. The ability to resist action reflects the underlying assumption that someone else will look out for the family's best interests and alert one to any problem. This form of power is not enacted through domination or control, but through the ability to withhold attention from certain domains of family life – the other side of Graeber's 'lopsided structures of imagination', whereby the party in the position of power is not

required to conduct any interpretive or imaginative labour. The closed- and open-door strategies of David and Diana represent how their gendered roles and relations of power feed into their decision to enact or dissolve boundaries when working from home, resulting in diverging emotional experiences when working from home.

Women must conduct additional emotional labour to manage the guilt they feel at their perceived inability to fulfil all roles when working from home. Because of this, many women's version of the closed-door strategy involves leaving the home and working in an office. Describing her ideal working arrangement, Diana tells me,

“I think I would do two long days in the office, And then two remote days. I'd like a four day week, then I would have one day a week when the kids were at school where I could do all that life admin and all the house-y stuff - all the boring jobs that I have to do, and not feel guilty that I'm not working and not looking after the kids, because the kids are at school, and I'm not supposed to be working. And then if I do the two long days in the office, I can 100% dedicate that to work. And then if I have two remote days, then I'm around for the kids, but I'm also working.”

Diana is only required in the office once every three months, and the three-hour commute makes this kind of routine boundary-setting impractical. However, the longing for spatial and emotional separation from the home and its associations was echoed by other women who were required in the office a greater amount. For example, Mandy, a sales manager working in a financial technology (FinTech) start-up, told me: “I definitely prefer working in an office. The main difference for me is the social interaction and segregation. I come out of my home environment and into a new environment, and I find everything about that easier.” The office, in these accounts, is not merely a professional site. It becomes a place where boundaries are more enforceable, role strain is reduced, and where gendered emotional and cognitive labour can be momentarily suspended. Ironically, this could imply that the ideal worker cultures that may stigmatise transparency around one's status as a mother may also create the conditions that allow women to uphold boundaries around their caring labour when working in the office.

Yet at the same time, arranging the care for children so that the office can be attended generates additional coordinative labour: “I couldn't do it every day,” notes Mandy, “because it's so much admin management to make sure the kids are picked up, dropped off, they've got their stuff, and we know where their day-care is and things like that between us.” This highlights the double-edged nature of hybrid work: the office offers a reprieve from the intensities of domestic life, the home offers the chance to access greater quality time with family, but organising these moments demands intensive labour that continues to fall disproportionately on women. Together, these dynamics demonstrate how the emotional, temporal, and organisational demands of coordinative labour intensify for mothers in hybrid arrangements, even when domestic tasks appear evenly shared

Possibilities for Change? Shared Practices of Coordinative Labour

Life for these hybrid working couples is no longer structured by shared rhythms, but by negotiated individual routines that must flex around rigid childcare schedules set by schools and nurseries. These individualised daily schedules produce new demands for feminised coordinative labour, as women juggle full-time hybrid work and their childcare responsibilities. The increased proximity to the home and children during the working day also generates challenges around the simultaneous fulfilment of motherhood and worker norms. The digital and material contexts constitutively entangle with the expectation that mothers oversee the management of care to generate a dense, always-on atmosphere of work and care. The load generated by the demands of coordinative labour is experienced as exhausting and emotionally fraught, which has further implications for their participation in the labour market – research suggests that women who carry a higher share of the cognitive load when compared with their male partners are significantly less likely to seek opportunities for career advancement, and are more likely to prefer reduced working hours (Helgøy and Weeks 2025).

Some couples in this study actively try to redistribute the coordinative labour to alleviate gendered stress by taking a more collaborative approach to temporal and spatial planning, as well as cultivating ‘me-time’ for women. Though these attempts at sharing coordinative labour are often fragile and partial, they represent the seeds of normative change and indicate the transformative possibilities of flexible work, coordinative labour, and its sociomaterial systems. The technology and systems used neither guarantee nor prevent the redistribution of labour, but instead depend on who initiates, sustains, and is accountable for the systems of coordination. Schedule negotiation can be a site of hopeful change whilst also being an example of how women remain the organisers of the home. Ultimately, I argue that coordinative labour can both reproduce or reimagine gendered divisions of labour, depending on how it is enacted. These efforts suggest that despite the ongoing “stickiness” (Weeks et al. 2025) of cognitive labour, some hybrid dual-earning couples take advantage of their increased control over time to actively imagine and negotiate ways to redistribute its allocation.

Collaborative coordination

As we saw in the example of Elizabeth and Edward, calendar and planner use is central to family organisation among hybrid working parents, whether analogue, digital, or a mixture of the two. Figure 22 is a screenshot of an iPhone calendar shared by Shruti. Shruti is required in the office once or twice a week, while her husband, who works in a U.S. market research firm, works fully remotely. They have a two-year-old son, who attends a nursery four days per week. She writes: “This is my personal calendar. It’s a digital calendar that me and my partner both have access to, and both maintain. We use it regularly and everything has to go

on it, we refer back to it and take it as gospel - if we are trying to plan things, we look at it to see if each other are busy/free. This is even more important now with the baby!” While Elizabeth’s account of their planning meetings revealed continued uneven gendered dynamics, other couples used digital tools to facilitate collaborative approaches to coordinative labour. For instance, Anjali notes: “My husband and I both maintain the shared calendar, and it’s basically the cornerstone of keeping our life up and running and functional.” Elena and her husband use an app called TimeTree to share their family calendar with grandparents and siblings in order to coordinate caregiving responsibilities (see Figure 23).

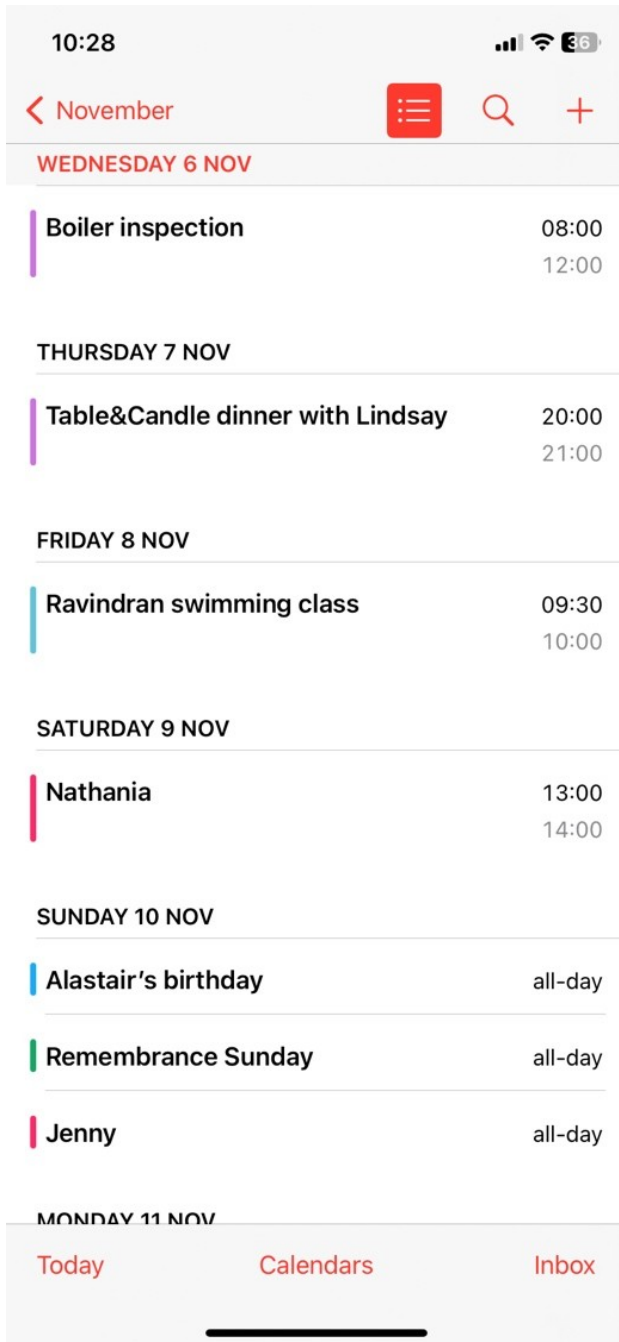


Figure 22. Shruti's calendar, which combines logistical entries like "boiler inspection" with relational ones like birthdays and social events.

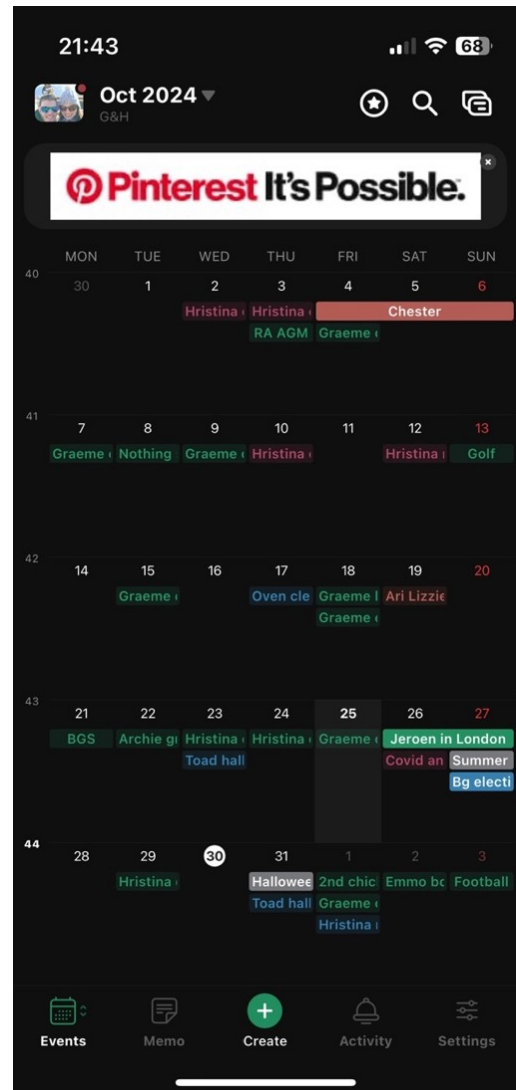


Figure 21. "Our calendar is a shared family calendar on an app called Timetree. Both me and my husband add appointments, days in the office, weekend plans, important events. It is shared with my in-laws and my sister so they can see our availability and if they need to help out with childcare or dogsitting" Lisa, entry in diary study.

Reflecting on their calendar-sharing, Shruti adds:

“I think it’s an example of the mental load being spent quite well, because we’re both responsible for, like, putting things in and checking things and making sure it's in there. And yeah, when you set something up, you're not asking the other person. You're just like looking at the diary and setting it up.”

Unlike in the example of Elizabeth and Edward, where Elizabeth continued to shoulder the lion’s share of the coordinative labour and Edward relied on her to check the calendar, Shruti describes the responsibility for their planning practices as evenly distributed. Yet she also acknowledged the limits of their approach: “remembering things like presents, birthdays – that stuff is still up to me”. Though sharing a digital calendar might afford a more collaborative approach to family planning by enabling visualisation, multiple editors, and notifications or reminders, what it fails to automatically unsettle is the gendered division of who updates the calendar with what kind of information. As Shruti highlights, she continues to shoulder ongoing ‘kinkeeping’ – the emotion work of maintaining connection amongst family members (Rosenthal 1985) – which shapes her interaction with the tool. Though Shruti and her husband’s calendar use begins to redistribute the responsibility for managing the family schedule, it simultaneously reproduces the dominant expectation that women, particularly mothers, be responsible for the emotional maintenance of the immediate family and sustaining ties with extended kin (Hornstra and Ivanova 2023). Shruti’s husband participates in coordinative labour, but the way he participates continues to perpetuate normative assumptions about who is responsible for the emotional wellbeing of the family.

This fragile and paradoxical dynamic is further illustrated by Lucas and Lydia, who are new parents living in London. At the time of research, Lydia was on maternity leave, and Lucas was working in a hybrid role at a regulatory agency. On a typical work-from-home day, Lydia cared for their baby while Lucas worked in a spare room converted into a home office. One morning, while responding to emails, Lucas received a message on his phone from Lydia, who was in the kitchen preparing baby food with the door closed to avoid waking their napping child. She asked if he’d like some tea. Lucas joined her in the kitchen, and over tea, they created their weekly meal plan—a regular practice that doubles as a moment to review their schedules and align their responsibilities. See Figure 24 for an image and caption uploaded to Lucas’s diary study.

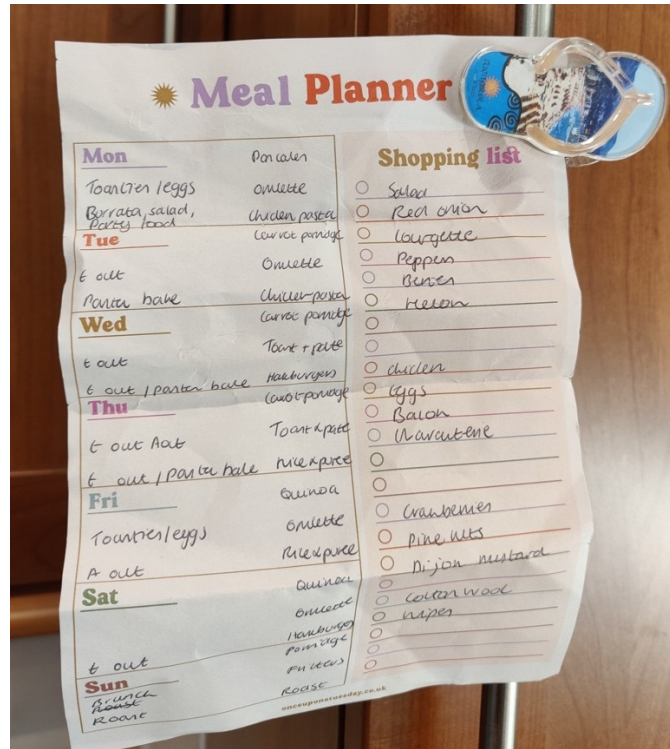


Figure 23. “Family calendar. Managed by myself and my wife. Use on a daily basis. All regular activities are in the calendar. The calendar is very important to organising our lives, especially knowing when one of us will have to solo with the baby.”

Creating the meal plan accomplishes the work of creating the shopping list for their weekend grocery trip and provides them with the opportunity to review their schedules for the week. They note who will be out on which days and which evenings. “I find it helpful to anticipate my cadence for the week ahead in terms of solo time with the baby,” explains Lucas. “And it highlights when we have imbalances in solo time.” In collaboratively planning family meals and time spent with the baby, Lucas and Lydia demonstrate how coordinative labour can become a shared practice. At the same time, there is simultaneous evidence that it remains anchored in expectations of maternal responsibility.

The flexibility of hybrid work allows Lucas and Lydia to insert moments of coordination into the workday by planning meals, aligning calendars, and checking in emotionally. These moments are made possible by the fragmentation of time and physical proximity that working from home affords: Lucas can pause between emails to share tea and negotiate the week ahead. But it is this fragmentation that also risks embedding coordination more deeply into the rhythm of women’s days. Lydia’s message, sent mid-task while preparing baby food, illustrates how even flexible arrangements can reproduce expectations of maternal multitasking and temporal density¹⁵. Technology mediates their fragmented schedule, enabling moments of shared responsibility while also reinforcing who is expected to orchestrate them. This dual potential underscores the ambivalence of coordinative labour and the role of technology: it can serve as a site of hopeful change and the redistribution of

¹⁵ In Chapter 6, I explore how unequal access to parental leave also reinforces women’s role as primary caregiver amongst hybrid working couples.

coordinative labour, or a new channel through which traditional gender roles persist under the guise of flexibility – potentially at the same time.

This ambivalence is further illustrated in another of Lucas's diary entries: "My wife is away for the weekend, so I am solo parenting from Friday afternoon to Sunday morning. Not my first time doing this, and I feel settled enough with various routines so I know I can handle it. Wife has planned and prepared every one of the baby's meals in advance, which would have been my biggest hurdle." Even in his confident description of solo parenting, the invisible management and preparation provided by Lydia exposes the enduring asymmetry in who bears the burden for the planning work. Men's ability to enact versions of emotionally attuned, physically present, engaged fatherhood is therefore frequently facilitated by the coordinative labour that is most often shouldered by women. These examples complicate the possibility of achieving any neatly defined narratives of equality in hybrid households, and instead reflect how the practices of coordinative labour can simultaneously reproduce and reconfigure gendered divisions of responsibility.

Me-Time

While some aim to reduce the stress and overwhelm experienced by mothers by sharing their coordinative labour, to varying degrees of success, others focus on scheduling leisure time, particularly for women. "Me-time" is time spent away from one's immediate family, engaging in one's own hobbies and personal pursuits. In other words, me-time is uninterrupted leisure time. Women engaged in a variety of activities as part of their me-time, including running, going to the gym, shopping, and spending time with their friends without the presence of children. Amelia prioritises time alone as a solution to the emotional effects of carrying the load. She says:

"Getting time for myself is really important, even though the day is so busy. This morning, I got up at five o'clock, I went to the gym for an hour before work because I feel like it makes me feel actually better. Having time for myself when I'm not answering to anybody or anything like that. And if I get up first, Amir gets up, gets the children up, gets their breakfast, I come home, they're having breakfast, have a shower... do you know what I mean?"

Wajcman (2015) argues that the heightened experience of time pressure amongst women when compared to men, despite similar amounts of time spent on paid work and leisure, can be explained by the greater amounts of juggling or multi-tasking by women. Wajcman finds that women's leisure time is more likely to be interrupted by other activities such as childcare, whereas men have greater access to undiluted leisure time. As I have explored, interruptions are amplified in the always-on work-from-home context. The leakiness of digital work, physical care, and coordinative care tasks amongst women working from home results in the experience of the mental load – an at times overwhelming compression of tasks

and roles. Furthermore, as I found in David and Diana's case, men may have greater access to uninterrupted work time when working from home, indicating that not only is leisure time interrupted, but work time is also. Wajcman argues that interrupted leisure that is snatched between work and caregiving activities is less restorative than unbroken leisure time. The unequal access to uninterrupted leisure *and* work time when working from home therefore may limit the possibility of genuine rest within the home, instead amplifying the mental load among women.

However, I found that whilst individualised work schedules generated the need for more coordinative labour, these autonomous schedules also facilitated the creation of "me-time" for some women. Similar to women's desire to close the door on their experiences of guilt while working from home, me-time is a demarcated moment to create distance from their domestic responsibilities via uninterrupted leisure time. It can also function as a site for the negotiation of the gendered dynamics of hybrid work and caregiving, where women redraw the boundaries and attempt to resist the responsibility for planning and emotional burden of guilt. As Amelia implied, her absence in the home whilst in the gym has consequential effects for Amir, who will be responsible for the morning rush. Elizabeth recently took a weekend trip for a friend's 40th birthday party. Despite worries about how her plans would impact Edward and her stepson's regular weekend trips to the local football stadium, she decided to step back from the planning work and allow Edward to organise his younger son's care. Describing how she felt, she said: "It's your responsibility, it's not up to me to solve that. It's 2024. I don't know if it's because I've turned 40, but I just don't give as many fucks anymore." Her emotive stance is a gendered refusal of the expectation that she continue to manage logistics in her absence, and a resistance to the interpretive, empathetic labour of coordination. Claiming me-time is thus not only about establishing uninterrupted leisure time as a reprieve from the experience of the mental load, but of enrolling male partners into the everyday organisation of the family to a greater degree in their absence.

Yet whilst me-time is positioned ostensibly as a reprieve from the emotional, digital, and cognitive demands that arise when work and care collide, the benefits of taking this time were often related back to how it might impact the family. For example, Neelam explained:

"I need to have time out from work and family. I see people who don't have that, and I think they're quite snappy with their children. And I'm not saying that's the reason, because I can be with my own children. But I think that having that time to do something you enjoy or spending time with people outside of that gives you things to talk about with them."

Time away from the family helps Neelam to avoid frustration and burnout while reinforcing the inextricable relation between women's emotional wellbeing and the family dynamic. In conversation with Anna, an ex-GP who now works at a HealthTech company, she describes how creating "me-time" arose not out of conflict but out of collaboration with her husband.

“We’ve engineered it so that now that the kids are in school, I have one day a week where I don’t work and I don’t have the kids,” Anna told me. “It’s my chance to catch up with house stuff and have some me-time.” Interested by her use of the phrase ‘engineer’, I asked: “Why was that important to you to engineer?” Anna smiled and nodded: “I reflected on this recently because we’ve prioritized it for me, but not my husband. It’s my way of coping with the extra administrative burdens and mental load of making sure school and home are caught up with. And I think that’s been really helpful.”

Thus, while me-time is framed as a break from feminised responsibility, it often remains tethered to the logics of care, with its legitimacy often grounded in how it benefits others. Rather than a structural redistribution of labour, in these examples me-time operates as a bounded, negotiated moment of pause. While perhaps not immediately transformative, me-time is still significant because it punctures the continuous flow of coordinative labour that women disproportionately shoulder. Even if bounded and temporary, these interruptions enact a challenge to gendered expectations of emotional and temporal availability. Coordinative labour is not a fixed burden, but a set of sociomaterial practices that can be reproduced, contested, or reworked.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how the adoption of hybrid working arrangements in dual-earning couples reshapes the gendered division of domestic labour and the gendered experience of the home in several ways. Many hybrid working couples celebrate their newfound ability to more evenly manage the spatial and temporal demands of day-to-day care of children using their flexible work schedules, sharing routine tasks such as school drop offs and cooking and spending more time overall with their children during the day. Yet, echoing findings from Daminger, Ruppner, and Weeks, women in heterosexual couples continue to shoulder the lion’s share of domestic cognitive labour. In this chapter, I introduced the concept of coordinative labour to describe and analyse the work of making paid work and care fit together. Under hybrid working conditions, that work becomes more fragmented, digitally mediated, and disproportionately carried by women.

Coordinative labour refers to the ongoing work of aligning schedules, proximity, and movements across the domains of paid work and care. It includes managing how one’s own working hours and location intersect with caregiving routines or with a partner’s work schedule, and, for many women, organising when, where, and how male partners participate in care. It includes a consideration of emotional response: e.g. will the child enjoy this club? This labour often relies on digital technologies, such as shared calendars, messaging apps, and notifications, used both individually and relationally to synchronise people, tasks, and time. It is frequently performed simultaneously with paid work via digital technologies when working from home, generating a sense of mental overload.

While flexibility is seen as a benefit by many women, enabling them to juggle their caregiving responsibilities with full-time paid work, the leakiness between work and family contributes towards a dense experience of time. While the calendar has long been the “hearth” of the middle-class family home (Lareau 2004), the temporal and spatial untethering of paid work creates a greater need for the work of aligning multiple asynchronous temporalities. Working in the home while young children are present contributes towards maternal worry and guilt to do with emotional attentiveness, rather than physical presence, requiring that women devise strategies such as ‘the open-door policy’ to manage this emotional labour.

I propose that coordinative labour builds on Daminger’s (2019) concept of cognitive labour and Dean et al.’s (2022) concept of the mental load by showing how planning and monitoring are intertwined with emotional attunement, temporal alignment, spatial organisation, and sociomaterial infrastructures. Though cognitive labour is often understood as the invisible and internal work of planning and monitoring, tracing how the efforts to coordinate care with work are distributed across networks of technologies and people makes this labour visible. A sociomaterial approach allows us to see coordinative labour as not merely a mental phenomenon, but as distributed across people, artefacts, and infrastructures that sustain domestic organisation, enabling us to locate the infrastructure of intangible work. Women’s sense of managerial responsibility is not just an internal process, but continually reproduced through notifications, reminders, emails, calendar apps which they feel beholden to attend to. The material affordances of these technologies meet the culture of intensive mothering to intensify the temporal experience of working from home into a dense, compressed, always-on environment where the normative expectations of roles compete for attention.

Though I have highlighted that the coordinative labour that arises out of and is required by greater flexibility is often a female-typed task, I posit that it is also a site where women and men can renegotiate and resist the expectation of maternal responsibility. Flexible working schedules provide couples with the opportunity to negotiate and reimagine how time is organised and spent; efforts to share the coordinative labour of family life *and* create moments of me-time indicate that some couples are actively imagining and negotiating ways to reduce the experience of the mental load. Technology that interrupts women’s days, such as digital calendars, can be repurposed as a collaborative platform that begins to distribute the labour of organisation – but only when adopted within a shared approach. However, even amongst more collaborative couples, women often remain responsible for ‘kinkeeping’, and me-time often remains valued within an overall logic of care that links women’s wellbeing to the wellbeing of the rest of the family. It may also require greater amounts of female preparation and organisation, such as Lydia’s preparation of food for Lucas’s solo time with the baby.

Ultimately, the gendered dynamics that shape how care and work are arranged and experienced by these hybrid workers are fundamentally determined by the structural relations

of power between men and women. The increased access to hybrid work can either reproduce lopsided structures of imagination (Graeber 2012) or become a site where these relations are renegotiated. Whether coordinative labour remains feminised or becomes more equitably distributed depends not only on the affordances of hybrid work, but on how couples confront and reshape gendered expectations. As the following chapters explore, these negotiations are further constrained by organisational culture and the broader structural context of the UK. Thus, coordinative labour captures the central paradox of hybrid work: flexibility both depends on and conceals the gendered effort required to align its temporal and spatial demands.

Chapter 5

The Hybrid Workplace: How Hybrid Work Arrangements Reshape the Gendered Experience of Work

Introduction

As I found in my examination of ‘the hybrid home’, the gendered experience of hybrid work cannot be separated from the gendered division of labour within dual-earning households. In this chapter, I explore how the experience of hybrid work is concurrently shaped by the organisational cultures and occupational norms that parents encounter at work. I examine how hybrid work reshapes the organisation of work and care, focusing on the increased reliance on digital infrastructures, shifting temporal expectations, and the continued importance of physical presence in gendered organisational cultures. I show how the temporal and spatial flexibility of hybrid working models does not simply change where work takes place, but can shape and restructure how professional time and presence are organised and valued in ways that can both unsettle and reproduce the gendered organisation of work and care. Building on Chapter 4’s analysis of coordinative labour within the home, this chapter traces how this gendered labour extends into the hybrid workplace, where it shapes how workers synchronise care and professional visibility.

In hybrid workplaces, gendered organisational cultures intersect with digital technologies to shape how visible workers choose to make their caregiving responsibilities. Hybrid work cultures exist along a spectrum, from ideal worker cultures that expect parents to conceal care using digital infrastructures, to supportive cultures that enable the visibility of caregiving responsibilities. Flexibility is thus not experienced equally and instead depends on organisational norms and managerial attitudes.

Yet across the spectrum, the increased flexibility in hybrid work reconfigures the spatio-temporal organisation of work and care in the home, blurring the boundaries between paid and unpaid labour. Work and care coexist continuously across digital and physical spaces, producing dense and overlapping rhythms of activity that are increasingly embedded as expected temporal norms. In this context, the meaning and value of in-person presence is reconfigured. As daily attendance becomes optional, being seen at the right moment rather than all the time becomes crucial for working parents to maintain their visibility and influence. This can enable some parents, particularly mothers, to pursue career development by attending the office more frequently but also requires that they choose between spending more time with their children or more time in the office, which depends on the coordination of care.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I compare vignettes from Tara and Anjali to show how organisational gender norms intersect with digital technologies to shape the visibility of care, creating diverging emotional experiences. Then, I explore how flexibility within hybrid

models blurs the boundaries between paid and unpaid labour at home and gives rise to shifting norms and expectations about the temporal management of work and family. Lastly, I turn to the office to explore how in-person attendance is strategic, rather than continuous, which can both offer opportunities and challenges for mothers' ability to pursue career progression. Together, these sections reveal how hybrid work both expands and constrains the possibilities for gender equality at work, producing a landscape that is more flexible and, for some, more inclusive, yet still shaped by enduring inequalities in responsibility for care.

Cultures of Concealment and Cultures of Care

He wishes I was a bloke: Digital ideal worker cultures

On a Wednesday afternoon, Tara joins a virtual meeting with her colleagues and managing director to catch up on their current project. The meeting is due to last thirty minutes and end at 4pm, leaving Tara enough time to pick up her daughters from nursery as planned. Tom, her husband who is also working from home, dropped the children off that morning. As a result, Tara feels a sense of obligation to collect them, combined with a personal desire to spend time reconnecting with them on the journey home. But the meeting lasts for nearly two hours. Watching the clock and becoming increasingly worried about her ability to travel to the nursery in time, Tara discreetly picks up her phone and, out of view to the camera, texts her husband to ask him to do the pick-up instead.

Hearing her husband close the door on the way out, she comforts herself with the thought that surely, the meeting will wrap up soon and she will have time to prep dinner for the family – her daughters often arrive home ravenously hungry. “I was getting more and more anxious, because I feel like I should be able to do the pick-up,” she reports in an audio file uploaded to her diary. “Then, I was sitting there, watching time tick by, realising that I wasn’t going to be able to get dinner ready either. You just get a bit worried about how hungry and grumpy everybody is going to be when they get home.” Her meeting continues, and Tara realises she is going to be unable to either make dinner or eat it with her children. At twenty past five, she hears her husband arrive home with her children and a new worry sets in: “They can be quite grumpy when they get home, so there was a strong chance that a crying child was going to run into the room, or maybe a happy child to see what I’m up to.”

Tara’s anxious efforts to digitally coordinate ad hoc childcare with her husband at the same time as participating in a meeting are intensified by the sense that she must conceal these efforts from her colleagues, and a fear of what might happen should her roles as mother and worker collide. Not only must Tara conceal her efforts to organise childcare, but also the presence of her young children in the home – particularly because her managing director is present on the call. “I think he wishes I was a bloke who didn’t have two small kids. [...] If you feel like your colleague is not the biggest fan of your private life encroaching on your working life all the time, then maybe a child running into the room is not the thing to

enamoured yourself to him.” At five thirty, the call ends. Tara is relieved: there were no interruptions, and no evidence of her anxiously concealed efforts to coordinate. In her diary reflection, she laments the loss of time. It would have been nice to finish some other work tasks and to clean the house - she had been busy at work in recent days. At least, she surmises, her attendance to the meeting “shows a bit of willing.” This moment of digitalised simultaneity, stress and anxiety, and caregiving organisation captures how coordinative labour enables women like Tara to align professional and domestic responsibilities while also concealing any visibility of this work, giving rise to negative emotions and overwhelm.

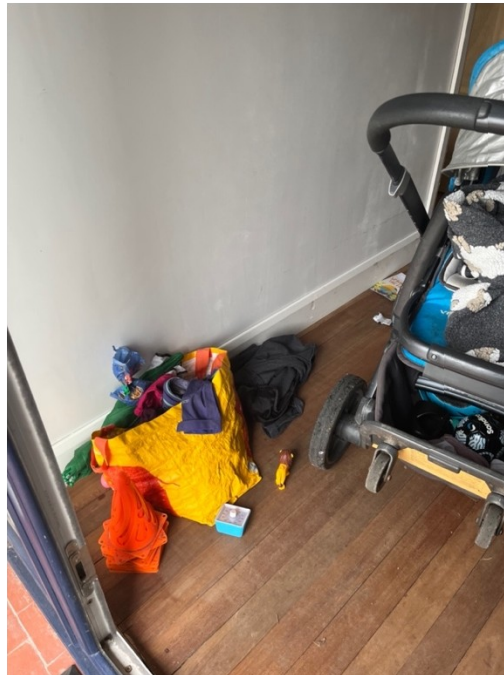


Figure 24: "The mess that greeted me when I came in from nursery drop off this morning. It's still there. Sadly no one else will tidy this up for me - I guess I am the office manager here!" Tara, Diary

Tara and Tom are a professional couple who live in a city in the southwest of the UK with their two young daughters. They first met while studying for their undergraduate degrees and bonded over their mutual love of outdoor sports. Now, Tom works as a civil engineer and Tara as a research manager. The pandemic transformed their working arrangements, enabling Tara to work predominantly from home and Tom to follow a hybrid model, though he is still expected ‘on site’ one night per week. He tells me that previously, working in the office “was never considered optional. Culturally, everyone was there. That’s what you did – that’s the way we work here.” Similarly, Tara describes it as “very rare” for someone in her organisation to work from home prior to the pandemic. This shift in the organisation of work means Tara and Tom can manage the care of their two children with much greater flexibility whilst also sustaining full-time careers. They adopt the collaborative, mix and match approach of many couples in this study, sharing the responsibility for nursery drop-offs and pick-ups, loading the dishwasher in the morning, and throwing laundry in the washing machine between meetings. In the evenings, when the dust settles on a busy day of juggling

childcare, housework, and work, Tara and Tom spend their limited downtime catching up, working on their garden, or doing the crossword together.

Even though their hybrid working arrangements facilitate Tara and Tom’s juggle of full-time work and care, daily life – for Tara, particularly - is not experienced as easy. “You become an adult with kids and you’re like oh my god, this is really hard,” Tara admits, after reflecting on how she imagined adult life as a child. “It’s really hard, and it’s expensive, and you have no time, and you have no energy.” In her diaries, her fatigue is palpable, and she frequently describes a heavy, affective mix of fatigue, stress, and guilt. She writes: “Bedtime with the two of them is my least favourite time of the week. I feel I should enjoy it, but I’m snappy and impatient and it’s really difficult. I know when I’m done I have an absolute ton of chores to do all the while hoping they don’t wake up too often to push my bedtime too late.” At the end of a long day of work and parenting, her sense of fatigue interferes with her ability to manage her emotions in line with the “feeling rules” (Hochschild 2012) of motherhood – the socially shared standards that pattern acts of emotion management. Beyond adjusting one’s surface level demeanour, Hochschild (1979) posits that emotion work involves “deep acting” to conjure up the appropriate feelings. Tara’s fatigue and irritation are dissonant with the cultural expectations of the emotionally attuned mother who finds fulfilment and enjoyment in her maternal role, contributing to her sense she is experiencing something she ‘should’ not.

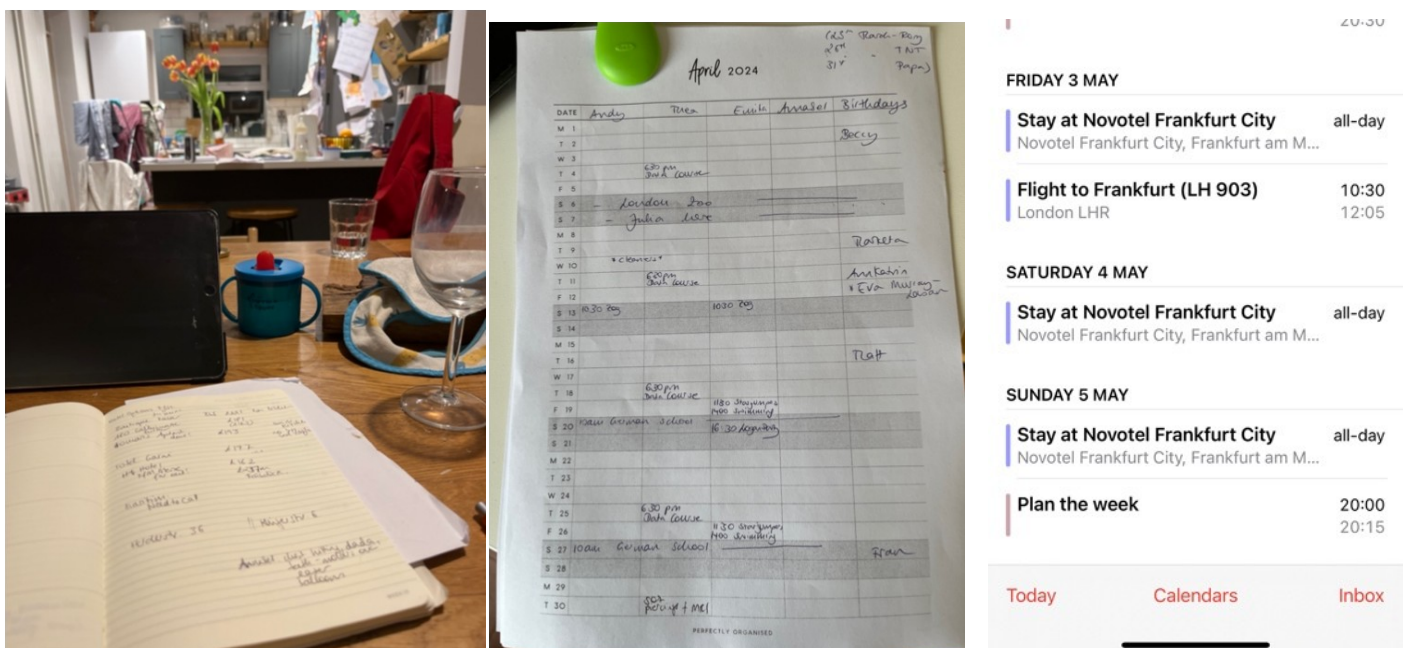


Figure 25. Tara's three weekly planning aids: her personal notebook, the family planner on the fridge, and her personal digital calendar. Not pictured: her work digital calendar.

Several factors heighten the intensity of Tara’s experience. Every week, Tom is away for two days and one night due to on-site work requirements, leaving Tara solely responsible for managing both paid work and full-time childcare: “I have to do all the drop-offs, all the pick-ups, all the dinners, bedtimes, all of that - two nights in a row,” she explains. These days

stretch her capacity to its limits. But even when Tom is home, the division of cognitive and emotional labour remains uneven. Like many couples in this study, their domestic arrangement reflects a gendered pattern: Tara manages, monitors, and coordinates many aspects of family life, while Tom's participation is often focused on routine, physical care tasks. "Tara does most of the food admin, because she's just better at it," Tom admits. "She remembers the recipes better than I do." This statement indicates their asymmetry. Tara is the default parent, responsible for remembering. This load is further compounded by the unpredictability of care. Her youngest child recently started nursery and frequently falls ill, which requires that Tara drop her work to collect and care for her child, often while battling exhaustion and illness herself. This accumulation of paid, emotional, and physical responsibilities places Tara in state of persistent strain, as the very flexibility that enables her to remain available for care fragments her workday and renders it continuously exhausting.

Tara's experience of managing work and care from home is intensified not only by the practical demands of her children's ages or the division of labour between her and Tom. The compounding source of strain is the need to actively conceal her caregiving responsibilities to align with prevailing organisational expectations of her employer – her managing director, in particular. As Tara puts it, her manager would "much rather that I was a bloke who doesn't have any kids and works 60 hours a week." These expectations are underpinned by deeply gendered norms that persist even within flexible work arrangements. At the core is the enduring power of the 'ideal worker' norm (Williams 2001), which assumes constant availability and an absence of domestic or caregiving obligations. Though the structures of work may have changed to enable greater flexibility for care, the professional norms that expect a certain kind of worker endure. The ideal worker remains imagined as male, unencumbered, and singularly devoted to paid labour. During the working day, Tara manages the ongoing fear that her children will be ill and her role as caregiver will be highlighted when she must collect them from nursery: "It's the constant fear of like, oh god, is the nurse gonna call?" Even on her days off, Tara admits to spending half an hour sending emails in order to demonstrate her ongoing commitment to work: "it's like oh, look, I'm willing to do this on the day I'm not working, which is very stupid. Just to be like, look, I'm still doing this, I'm still reliable, the stuff is still moving along and no hold back here."

Williams (2001) argues that white-collar workplaces are built around masculine models of work that align with the "traditional life patterns of men" (p2) and systematically disadvantage those with caregiving responsibilities, particularly women, who are culturally assumed to be the primary caregivers. The organisational demand for uninterrupted availability frames caregiving as a departure from the professional norm, casting mothers as inherently less committed, less reliable, and therefore less worthy of reward or advancement. Acker's (1990, 2012) theory of the gendered logic of organisations further illustrates how these norms are embedded within workplace practices that appear neutral, such as fixed hours, standardised breaks, and expectations of undivided attention, and built on the image of an unencumbered abstract worker who has no body and no obligations outside of the

workplace. As Acker states, “these rules appear to be gender neutral, but they are not” (p218), with men much more likely than women to be structurally positioned to conform to the ideal.

In the context of an ideal worker culture, flexibility in hybrid work becomes a double bind. It enables Tara to remain available for work and care while simultaneously requiring her to conceal her dual availability to maintain the appearance of being unencumbered. Hybrid working models de-institutionalise the temporal and spatial requirements of work, enabling working parents to manage their childcare schedules with more ease. For example, many described leaving home at 3pm to collect their child from primary school and returning to work once home. However, this flexibility does not necessarily dismantle the ideal worker norm. Instead, in cases like Tara’s, it reframes the possibility of enacting it. The normative expectations of constant availability, undivided attention, and the invisibility of care persist, but are now managed and hidden in new ways. For Tara, her manager’s implicit preference for an unencumbered worker intensifies the pressure to conceal her caregiving responsibilities. This concealment becomes a part of her daily labour and the effort of managing this concealment adds an extra layer to her already heavy mental load, which is now not only a matter of caring and coordinating, but managing how this labour is (or is not) perceived. Paid work layers with coordinative labour, and layers again with perception management.

The technologies of concealment

Acts of concealment and perception management in a hybrid model are sociomaterial practices, shaped by entanglements of people, technologies, and organisational norms (Orlikowski and Scott 2008). Workplace platforms and personal devices are repurposed not only for communication and collaboration, but also as tools for hiding care and layering forms of labour. Much like Amelia who, in the previous chapter, booked her child’s afterschool care whilst presenting on Teams, Tara discreetly manages her childcare whilst in a meeting, using digital technologies to simultaneously manage her roles as worker and parent. As noted by Orlikowski (2000), people’s decisions about how to use technology are affected by situated institutional and organisational norms. Technology use entangles with the organisational norms to mutually constitute a new sociomaterial arena of practice. In the context of hybrid work in ideal working cultures, technologies not only enable flexibility and remote work but also become central to sustaining the invisibility of care and the simultaneous juggle of roles.

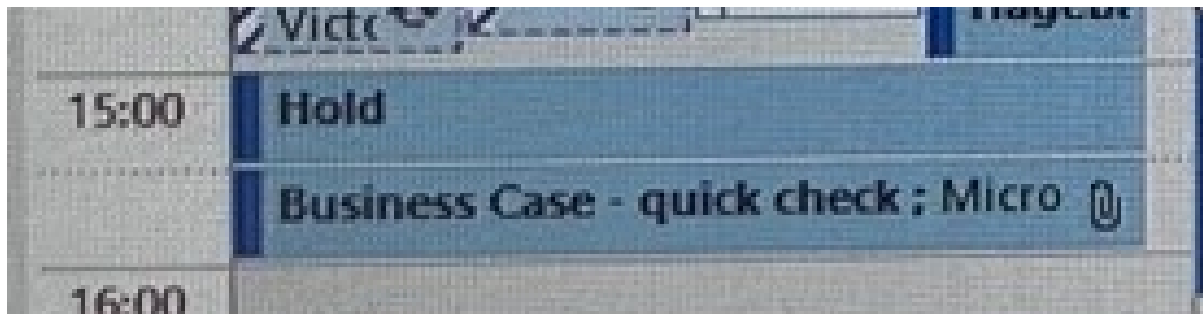


Figure 26. Gary's work calendar screenshot

Parents navigate the pressures of ideal worker norms within the digital infrastructure of hybrid work. In his diary, father-of-one Gary shared a screenshot of his calendar – see Figure 27. At 3pm, on Monday, Thursday, and Friday, he has a thirty-minute meeting in his digital calendar labelled 'hold'. "I don't explicitly say what it is," he admits, "I think most people would assume it's a work meeting." Instead, Gary uses this time to pick his daughter up from school. During our interview, he downplays the extent to which he is concealing his caregiving responsibilities, saying: "If they applied a bit of logic and thought, most people would figure out that might be where I am some days." Yet later, when he tells me, "I've seen people in there with lunch blocked out every day, and I think that's a bit brave," the continued power of the ideal worker norm is evident. Blocking out time for care is only permissible when invisible, and overt claims to personal time are perceived as bold, or even inappropriate. Within these gendered organisational cultures, the infrastructure of hybrid work allows for the accommodation of care, but not its recognition. Rather, the digital infrastructure facilitates the concealment of care. Gary's disguised calendar blocks demonstrate his digitalised coordinative labour; he manipulates technological infrastructures to integrate caregiving into the rhythms of work without breaching organisational norms.

The femininity stigma: Male caregiving in ideal hybrid workplaces

What Gary's reflections also reveal is that men, by virtue of their gender, are not immune to the expectations of ideal worker culture that stigmatise care. While some research has identified a 'fatherhood premium' (Hodges and Budig 2010), referring to the tendency for fathers to receive workplace advantages relative to non-fathers and mothers, this is based on the normative assumption that men will occupy a breadwinner role within a heterosexual family model. In this framework, fatherhood signals stability, maturity, and commitment to paid work (Berdahl and Moon 2013) and does not automatically conflict with the expectations of the ideal worker norm. For example, one father described to me how he was perceived at his workplace as growing from "a boy to a man" when becoming a father, but that his colleagues disapproved of his children appearing on internal calls.

However, when men deviate from this model and actively engage in caregiving, the fatherhood premium can be replaced by what Rudman and Mescher (2013) call the femininity stigma and the poor worker stigma. They find that men who request flexible and family leave are viewed as poor workers, ineligible for rewards, higher on 'weak' feminine

traits such as uncertainty, and lower on agentic masculine traits such as ambitiousness. Berdahl and Moon (2013) find that caregiving men are more likely to experience workplace harassment and mistreatment than “traditional” fathers and men without children. These findings indicate that it is the active participation in and visibility of caregiving that conflicts with the ideal worker norm, rather than the gender of the worker. Because of the association of caregiving with the performance of femininity, caregiving men may in fact experience the double stigma of deviating from both traditional gender and professional norms¹⁶.

“It feels like a walk of shame,” admits Asher, a father-of-two who identifies himself as the “primary caregiver” of his sons. Asher’s wife holds a senior position in a consulting firm, and they decided when their children were young that she would act as the primary earner of the household, with Asher working full-time but with more flexibility to absorb the childcare duties. Describing the difficulty of managing perceptions whilst working in-person, he says: “I won’t be that relaxed in the office. Particularly because I know I’ll have to leave really early, visibly early, perhaps even *embarrassingly* early, to go and pick up the kids, and then carry on later on. Working remotely, I’m able to mask all of that quite well.” Like Gary, Asher blocks out times in his calendar for the school run when working from home and has never been questioned by his colleagues. Without the digital infrastructure to manage and conceal his caregiving responsibilities, Asher’s status as primary caregiver is laid bare when working in person. Like Tara, the shame and anxiety he feels stems not from caregiving itself, but how it will be perceived by colleagues. “I’m not the only one who has kids, but I’m the only one who is a primary carer for them,” he adds, and describes his employer, a financial technology (FinTech) company headquartered in London, as male dominated.

“Maybe I’m vulnerable or sensitive about it, but I think sometimes they think – well, can’t your wife do this one? And I don’t think that anyone would ask a woman whether her husband should do it instead of her. I think there’s an expectation that I’m outside of the norm, and it’s like, well why are you doing all of this? So, leaving the office does feel like a walk of shame. You feel that people are looking, saying, it’s half three, what are you doing? You know, you go for lunch and then you’ve got your coat and your bag and everything with you... I feel like I have to make excuses for it or justify it. I feel shame associated with it.”

In the social study of emotion, shame, like guilt, is understood as arising from a perceived failure to meet or uphold socially defined norms and expectations (Hochschild 1979). Yet unlike guilt, which is conceptualised as the internalisation of this sense of failure, shame is external and depends on the perceived or real presence of others for its actualisation (Elster 1999). Shame emerges in moments when one’s inability to live up to a social ideal becomes visible to others. In Asher’s case, shame is also entangled with the symbolic femininity associated with his role as primary caregiver, which is highlighted when he stands to leave

¹⁶ However, Berdahl and Moon point out that though fathers may experience more interpersonal harassment than mothers, they may not experience the same structural barriers to progression that mothers do.

earlier than anybody else, marking him as deviating from normative or traditional masculinity *and* the ideal worker norm.

Shame is often accompanied by the desire to hide (Ahmed 2014). In the case of hybrid workers, it is intimately linked to acts of concealment using digital technologies. In organisations with a dominant sub-group of workers, such as in male-dominated professions, visibility for ‘token’ members of the minority group may carry negative consequences such as career stagnation, leading tokens to respond in a way that either keeps a low profile or assimilates to the dominant group (Kanter 1977). In ideal worker cultures, visible caregiving may carry not only the emotional burden of shame, but a material risk to the employee’s career. Unlike in Kanter’s original study, which analysed the experience of women in male-dominated organisations, Asher is male. Yet he is also the only primary parent, rendering him a token in that regard, and solidifying his association with the culturally feminine. When working from home, hybrid workers can mask their ‘shameful’ caregiving responsibilities via the affordances of digital platforms. As Asher’s account reveals, the shift to greater flexibility does not automatically lead to the destigmatisation of care, which becomes more apparent in-person. Instead, it enables parents to act with greater discretion using digital technologies, absorbing the responsibility for managing their children’s care and how it is perceived, resulting in a reconfiguration of worker strategies to deal with gendered worker norms, rather than their removal.

Recognising that people have kids: Digital supportive work-family cultures

However, not all parents reported engaging in acts of digital concealment, driven by gendered organisational norms that stigmatised caregiving responsibilities. Instead, many reported experiencing a more “supportive work-family culture”, defined by Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness (1999) as those that make it easier for employees to balance work and family demands and, consequentially, reduce employee experiences of work-family conflict. As such, I argue that the gendered cultures of hybrid organisations exist along a spectrum, with one end aligning more closely with traditional, masculine ideal worker norms, and the other with supportive work-family cultures.

I posit that in hybrid supportive work-family cultures, care can be made visible and integrated as part of a legitimate professional identity, and the technologies that in ideal worker cultures are adapted to conceal caregiving responsibilities are repurposed to enable the visibility of care and spread the labour of coordination. This relates to findings from Müller and Chung (2025), who find evidence for the emergence of an ‘inclusive worker norm’ in their examination of Swiss job adverts from 2001-2023. This norm values devotion pluralism, recognising that workers have commitments beyond family, and de-genders equity by seeing all genders as equally capable of both work and care. In their longitudinal analysis, Müller and Chung find that the ideal worker norm has weakened over time while the inclusive worker has grown, with more job adverts mentioning flexibility, work-life balance, and

gender inclusion. My data builds on their findings by exploring workers' lived experiences, showing how these norms are negotiated in practice.

Every year, Anjali's company hosts a Halloween event. Parents are invited to bring their children to the office, where they can participate in games and trick-or-treating. "It's a really nice way of recognising that people have kids," she tells me. Her employer is an education technology (EdTech) company headquartered in London, where she has worked for over four years. Anjali first contacted me to participate in my research after my research flyer was shared on her company's Parents and Carers Slack channel, a dedicated online space for colleagues with caring responsibilities to communicate and offer peer support. In her diary, she shared a screenshot of her Google Calendar, where I noticed that she had blocked out the school run in the morning and evenings. Unlike Gary and Asher, Anjali labels hers 'School run' – see Figure 27. Screenshot of Anjali's calendar showing her school run She confirmed that this is visible to her colleagues: "Yes, so they can see school run blocked out, because it's on my work calendar. So, I block off the school run on my calendar, and then anything after the school run, I have a little block saying 'Please ask before booking', and I've been pleasantly surprised that actually everybody does ask first, which is really nice." The second block is in place so that Anjali has the time to arrange after-school care for her children to avoid what she jokingly describes as the risk of "random screaming in the background" when on a client call. If the call is internal and takes place after the school run, she adds, they are often present in the room with her.



Figure 27. Screenshot of Anjali's calendar showing her school run and 'please ask before booking' calendar blocks.

Anjali's calendar practices make her caregiving responsibilities visible, and she uses this visibility to actively integrate her caregiving responsibilities into her professional time. These sociomaterial practices of visibility occur within her employer's broader "work-family culture", which Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness (1999) define as the "shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the way an organisation supports and values the integration of employee's work and family". Unlike participants who conceal care to avoid professional penalties, Anjali customises the digital infrastructure of work to facilitate the visibility of care. The affordances of the digital calendar, where Anjali can label meetings in ways that broadcast her status as mother, entangle with her normative organisational context that has destigmatised the presence of care in professional life. Choosing visibility via her sociomaterial practices ultimately becomes a mechanism for distributing the coordination of work and family across her team, ensuring that caregiving is factored into others' decisions, and reproducing the broader supportive work-family culture in the organisation. I suggest that

supportive work-family cultures may give rise to inclusive worker norms and practices that “positively value both work and nonwork commitments” (Müller and Chung 2025: 20).

Supportive work-family cultures enable parents to manage the disruptions caused by caregiving when working from home transparently. When caught in the rush-hour traffic on the way home from the school run, Max often shifts his one-to-one internal Zoom calls to the telephone, taking them from the car. Ahmed accommodates his children’s presence during remote work by setting up a small table in his office where they can draw. When they make noise, he mutes himself and types his comments in the chat: “My colleagues don’t mind – they never get interrupted.” These practices show how the visibility of care is negotiated through small, practical adjustments that are accepted, rather than penalised, by colleagues. “This is the first company that I have ever been able to work in where I actually don’t feel like I have to hide that I’m a mother,” Diana tells me with a smile. “And before, if someone asked me what I was doing at the weekend, I wouldn’t reference family things because that negatively impacted their perception of me. It’s like oh, she’s got children, she’ll be off all the time, or she’s not committed to the business. I mention my children all the time now, and so do my colleagues. If my children are sick, I don’t feel like I have to try and hide it.” Unlike Tara, who must do the extra labour of concealing her caregiving responsibilities to ‘show willing’, workers in supportive work-family contexts can foreground their parental roles. Visibility becomes a resource rather than a risk, enabling the integration of care into professional routines, and reducing the load of shame and the anxiety of perception management.

Van der Lippe and Lippényi (2020) define supportive work-family cultures in opposition to ideal worker cultures, which expect that employees work long hours and arrange their other responsibilities around paid work. A supportive work-family culture generates organisational norms that encourage the use of family-friendly benefits and respects the employee’s external responsibilities. Research based on data gathered prior to the pandemic finds that the perception of a supportive work-family culture is positively related with the utilisation of work-family benefits such as job sharing, working from home, flextime, and shared parent leave (van der Lippe and Lippényi 2020; Thompson et al. 1999). Conversely, in ideal worker cultures, even if formalised work-family benefits exist, they may be less utilised because of the stigmatisation of care and the employee’s fear of professional penalty. The pandemic induced a wide adoption of flexible working arrangements, but this shift was driven by the necessity of lockdown orders, rather than by the spread of supportive work-family professional norms. In workplaces like Tara, Gary, and Asher’s, which align more with the ideal worker norm, flexibility both enables the juggle of work-family responsibilities *and* intensifies the pressure to manage care invisibly. In more supportive organisational contexts, flexibility can alleviate this conflict by allowing caregiving responsibilities to be openly acknowledged and accommodated within professional routines.

Manager as mediator: The role of management in facilitating visibility

“It really helps if you’ve got an understanding manager, who’s been through it before.” Sam, father-of-one, tells me. Similarly, describing the origin of her calendar practices, Anjali says: “There were a couple of dads in very senior roles and both of them put it in their diary, and would make it normal and make it acceptable, and I really appreciated them being open about it. They had like, bed and bath time blocked out. And it set the tone for more junior employees that are going to go on maternity leave, that this is an OK thing to do.” Thompson et al (1999) highlight managerial support and sensitivity to employees’ family responsibilities as central to the formation of supportive work-family cultures. This may be linked to the overall shifts to occupational norms found by Müller and Chung (2025), who argue that workers are expected to have a plurality of devotions. My findings suggest that the extent to which parents felt that their caregiving could be visible and legitimate in the workplace often hinged on whether senior figures modelled it themselves – this plurality is demonstrated by managers and, in a hybrid workplace, made visible through digital technologies.

Diana reflected on the shift she experienced after leaving a more ideal worker culture in financial services: “What’s different here is that they didn’t just *say*, they *did*. So my boss, and my boss’s boss, all male, would message me to say I’m leaving early today because I’ve got to take my kids swimming. And in my previous company, my boss, his boss, and his boss’s boss – they were all the main breadwinners and their partners didn’t work.” Similarly, Linda remembers the first time she witnessed her male manager discuss his childcare responsibilities at work: “He just said, oh, I’ve got to go now. I’m doing the school run today. And I thought, you know what? A, it’s so liberating to hear and B, from a dad. So, yeah. And after that, I started being a bit more upfront.” These sentiments echo findings from Burnett et al. (2013) and Ladge et al. (2015) which highlight the facilitatory role of line managers, where they found that sympathetic line managers will champion fathers’ requests for work-family allowances, such as flexible working arrangements, whereas unsympathetic managers may block these requests.

What is striking in Diana, Linda and Anjali’s experiences is the pivotal role that their managers play in setting the gendered culture of an organisation. When those in leadership positions visibly acknowledged their caregiving roles, they normalised care within the workplace and challenged the assumption that caregiving is a private matter, incompatible with professional identity. Instead, they modelled it as a legitimate and integrated part of working life. Men in Diana, Linda, and Anjali’s organisations use their positions of institutional power to make care visible, expanding the range of what is professionally acceptable for others in the organisation. Several participants described having women managers with children who were supportive of work-family integration, but expressions of surprise and relief were most often directed at male managers who visibly acknowledged their caregiving responsibilities. Supportive practices by men tended to be described as norm shifting and culturally significant, suggesting that it is not simply the visibility of care that disrupts ideal worker norms, but who is visibly performing the care. When male managers

make caregiving visible, they unsettle gendered assumptions about the integration of caregiving and professional identities and who should be responsible for care – the femininity stigma – in ways that women managers may be less likely to do.

In traditional and hegemonic conceptions, successful masculinity and being a ‘good’ father is predicated on one’s ability to act as breadwinner for the family (Acker 1990; Williams 2001b). This ideal is mutually reinforcing with the ideal worker norm, which expects certain kinds of masculine workers who are rewarded for their prioritisation of the workplace, rather than of their family, with status and pay. This normative context leads men like Asher to be stigmatised as ‘outside of the norm’. However, the growing expectation for men to participate in the routine and emotional dimensions of childrearing in recent years – what is described as ‘involved fatherhood’ (Dermott 2014; Faircloth 2023) – has changed the meaning, value, and behaviours associated with ‘good’ fatherhood. What the evidence from these supportive work-family cultures demonstrates is that some senior men, who may increasingly identify with the involved father norm, are leveraging their status and authority within organisations to unsettle entrenched traditional professional norms in favour of integrating visible caregiving practices with their professional identity. In using their agenda-setting power (Fleming and Spicer 2014) as management and as men to disrupt hegemonic gender norms, male managers set the stage for their female juniors and men with caregiving responsibilities to replicate their practice¹⁷.

Edward, who manages a large team in his role at a bank, described how his attitude towards care shifted over time as his personal circumstances changed: “I’m really clear at work about my own scenario, and I try to be super thoughtful when someone’s got children - I’m really mindful when I talk to my team about expectations for work. [...] I should be transparent that, when I was younger, my ex-wife used to be at home looking after my kid, and I probably wasn’t the most parent friendly manager. It didn’t even cross my mind. I regret that.” His reflection demonstrates that managerial awareness of caregiving is often shaped by one’s own experiences and divisions of labour in the home. It also highlights the inherent tension in the role of managerial perceptions in supporting those with caregiving responsibilities at work. Though the senior role-modelling of caregiving can help destigmatise care and legitimise its integration into professional life, it also reinforces the status of senior male management as the gatekeepers of organisational culture who are able to set the standard for professional norms. This entrenches the structural dominance of men, even as it reframes it, and leaves non-senior workers with caregiving responsibilities in a vulnerable position. As noted by Burnett et al. (2013), even in organisations with good work-family benefits, an unsympathetic manager can block an employee’s access to these provisions. Were Edward to leave his current role and be replaced by a manager with no

¹⁷ However, implicit within these dynamics of visibility is a continued vertical segregation between male managers and their female supervisees, which may indicate that even though an organisation’s work-family culture may be more supportive, there are other barriers to women’s progression in the workplace.

caregiving responsibilities, his supervisees may suddenly experience the pressure to conceal their caregiving obligations.

Temporal Entanglements: The Gendered Rhythms of Hybrid Work at Home

In the previous section, I highlighted how gendered organisational cultures intersect with digital technology to shape how visible workers chose to make their caregiving responsibilities. In this section, I explore how the flexibility embedded by hybrid working arrangements blurs the boundaries between paid and unpaid labour in the home, producing a continuous and fragmented rhythm of work and caregiving. Beyond the occupational norms that stigmatise or de-stigmatise caregiving identities at work, I suggest a broader evolution to the expected temporality of work and care, from sequential to multi-layered. Care and work coexist dynamically in both digital and material forms; parents trade flexibility during the day for childcare with work that can extend into the evening, while maintaining an ongoing mobile availability to their employer. In this section, I build on Müller and Chung's (2025) concept of the inclusive worker norm, which they position as the antithesis to the ideal worker norm. I extend their theorisation by showing that, in practice, even gender-inclusive models of hybrid work, where parents visibly juggle work and care, can obscure and even exacerbate persistent gender inequalities.



Figure 28. Anna's laptop at the kitchen table, surrounded by children's drawing material

Give and take arrangements: Blending work and care

At 5pm, Anna closes her laptop and walks downstairs for their evening family meal. Her husband, Andrew, has prepared dinner for her and their three young daughters. Today was his turn to pick up the children from nursery and school at 3pm and, since returning home over an hour ago, he has been cooking and playing with the children. Dinner is considered

important quality time in their family but, as Anna notes in her diary, she keeps her phone close by in case any urgent emails come through. After dinner, Andrew returns to their office to continue work and Anna writes: “Now, it’s my time to be mum.” She cleans the kitchen and helps her children make Mother’s Day cards for their grannies, because there is “no homework today”. She bathes them, reads to them, and gets them all into bed with the lights off before 8pm, writing, “I always feel very lucky to get the chance to do bath and stories with the kids every night.” At eight, with her children tucked in, she opens her laptop at the kitchen table and continues to work. After about an hour of answering emails and finishing tasks from earlier in the day, she stops and switches back to ‘mum-time’ – filling out her children’s reading diaries, ironing school uniforms, and straightening out the house. Her husband continues to work in their office, taking calls with colleagues in the US until after 10. Once he leaves their office, they sit down to watch TV and head to bed at 1am – in Anna’s estimation, “a very standard Monday!”

Anna describes her manager as “very relaxed” about the flexibility of her working hours. She characterises her working arrangement as a “give and take”, based on a mutual understanding of “doing the work and also willing to be flexible, or, you know, doing things outside of when you might normally do them.” Her manager understands and accommodates Anna’s caregiving responsibilities, enabling her to fulfil her desire to be, as she describes it, “a present mum”. In return, she often works in the evening and layers an ambient awareness of work communication over time spent with family on routine caregiving, for example by keeping her phone nearby during dinner. In detaching work from its typical spatial and temporal locations, hybrid working arrangements unsettle the association between physical presence in an office and productivity that has been the hallmark of the ideal worker norm. Historically, the ideal worker was defined by the ability to be physically present in the workplace for long, uninterrupted hours, with those hours serving as the key measure of commitment (Acker 1990; Williams 2001). This model systematically disadvantaged those with caregiving responsibilities. Anna’s account, however, points to a shift: in hybrid contexts, professional presence can now be achieved digitally, allowing parents to be simultaneously physically present with their children.

Crucially, Anna’s and others’ accounts show that digital presence can coexist with openness about caring responsibilities. In supportive work–family cultures, working beyond “when you might normally” and being reachable emerge from a sense of reciprocity to the employer: a trade-off for trust and flexibility oriented towards childcare, rather than an attempt to prove one’s worth in the face of stigma. As Diana explained, “I feel trusted, empowered, and I’m able to bring my full self to work.” This stands in contrast to ideal worker cultures such as Tara’s, where demonstrations of digital visibility, even on days off, is aimed at counteracting the suspicion that caregiving undermines commitment, often intensifying the sense of work–family conflict. While Tara conceals her work-family juggle, Anna reports a transparent and mutually supportive relationship with her manager. Therefore, in supportive work-family cultures, trust, rather than concealment, enables parents to be present at key family moments

like drop-offs, mealtimes, bedtime, bath time, and reduces their sense of work–family conflict. “Curriculum evenings, parents’ evenings... my assumption is that I’m going to be at all of those things,” Max tells me. “And if I have a call at 11 at night, I don’t grimace because it’s a trade-off.”

Existing scholarship has framed such digital work practices as extensions of the ideal worker norm. In her original conceptualisation, Williams (2001) argues that the ideal worker norm is partially predicated on the employer’s entitlement to demand a worker with immunity from family work. Acker (1990) highlights the expectation in white-collar workplaces that workers be unencumbered, with no outside obligations, enabling unwavering devotion and the long-hours culture that has elsewhere been described as presenteeism (Howcroft et al 2025). When working from home, Jarvis-King (2023) argues that workers replace being seen at desks with new forms of digital presenteeism, e.g. by working on personal devices in the evening, replying quickly, and maintaining an online status. Howcroft et al. (2025) extend this argument, suggesting that the ideal worker themes of work prioritisation and presenteeism are maintained but reconfigured in digitalised work, as workers use their enhanced connectivity to present their work prioritisation in different, but no less intrusive ways.

I build on these conceptualisations by highlighting the importance of accounting for an organisation’s approach to the visibility of caregiving responsibilities. In organisations with a supportive work-family orientation, the hybrid worker is no longer the wholly unencumbered, work-devoted figure - closer to what Müller and Chung (2025) describe as the inclusive worker norm. This worker visibly integrates care and paid work through the compression and fragmentation of tasks across time, using precise coordination and digital tools such as calendars and video conferencing platforms to blend parenting and professional duties into an individualised temporal rhythm. Such coordination appears gender-neutral and even progressive, offering an inclusive model for working parents to manage their caregiving responsibilities. Indeed, it is more openly accommodating of caregiving than traditional ideal worker cultures that demand concealment and perception management. Yet this apparent flexibility masks persistent gendered inequalities in the cognitive and emotional responsibilities for the home. These responsibilities continue to shape who can sustain the levels of digital presence that work and care demand.

Trust, anxiety, and temporal norms

Despite reporting that she felt trusted and empowered in our interview, in her diary Diana wrote: “It always feels quite stressful when I do school pick-up rather than drop off, and when it’s my turn to do the boy’s dinners. I make up the time at work, but I worry it puts me in a bad light if I’m not contactable all the time.” Being able to share her identity as a mother did not remove the pressure to remain available; it simply reframed juggling continuous availability *and* motherhood as part of being a ‘trusted’ worker. The pressure that arose from this role strain was often internalised by workers rather than imposed from above. As one

manager recounted: “One of my colleagues came on a call with me, after we’d had quite a tricky day. He’d just seen an email from a client asking for some work to be done, and I told him, drop that, just go and have a cup of tea. Call it a day – finish early and take it easy. I got on the call with him this morning, and he said, I couldn’t let it lie. I got on with it, got it done, fixed the issue. But he was really appreciative of the fact that I said, you know, it’s not that important.” Paradoxically, even in seemingly more inclusive workplaces, trust can transform into anxiety and intensify the pressure to remain contactable. Like the guilty mother who fears that she is never present ‘enough’ for her children, workers’ diary entries often captured the sense that they never felt ‘off-duty’.

The digital tools used in remote work do more than mediate collaboration from a distance. They materialise and co-produce shared standards for digitalised omnipresence, productivity, and the quality of output in a hybrid workplace. For example, user researcher Lin observed how a male colleague, Bobby, was perceived as the “golden child” by senior leadership. She linked his reputation to the excellent quality of his work, which she attributed to the long hours he spent working. His after-hours dedication was visible in the collaborative platforms they used for work: “I got a notification he was commenting on one of my design files on a Saturday night,” she noted. Digital platforms display individual contributions with time stamps in a publicly visible digital arena: “a lot of these hybrid work tools, you’re not the only one anymore, it’s not an offline doc – everyone can access it.” Digital visibility can help set informal organisational benchmarks for commitment and output, which are often shaped by those with greater time and energy to devote to work, and therefore harder for others to meet without similar resources. As in Goldin’s (2021) concept of “greedy jobs”, those able to work longer hours are more highly valued and compensated, reproducing inequalities for those with greater caregiving or time constraints. Therefore, while some hybrid working cultures may appear more inclusive to working parents, they re-embed expectations that intensify the pressure to meet an unattainable standard of work and paradoxically begin to resemble the organisational behaviours of more traditional organisational gender cultures.

Chung (2022) proposes the term ‘self-exploitation’ to describe the tendency for workers in flexible roles to engage in ‘unpaid overtime’, ultimately working longer hours than people who work standard, fixed hours and consequentially experiencing the encroachment of work into their family and leisure time. She highlights that self-exploitation is gendered; women are more likely to expand both the hours they spend doing domestic and paid labour when working flexibly, and men are more likely to expand their hours spent in paid labour. Yet while the concept of self-exploitation captures important aspects of gender and work extensification under flexible working arrangements, it relies on an implicit ideal of a bounded 9–5 workday as the normative standard. I posit that, amid the emergence of the inclusive worker norm, this norm is shifting. Many hybrid working parents no longer expect or aspire to strict temporal boundaries separating work and care. Instead, they accept, and sometimes embrace, blurred and fragmented time boundaries as a strategy to coordinate their multiple roles and responsibilities, navigating a shifting temporal reality where work and care

are not neatly segmented but spatially and temporally layered. Their days are dense and boundaries leaky, with work encroaching into family time and caregiving tasks interrupting and overlapping with work tasks.

This evolving temporal landscape challenges traditional understandings of work–life separation and calls for new ways of conceptualising temporality in hybrid work arrangements. Framing flexible workers as victims of unpaid overtime risks obscuring the complex, multi-layered temporal norms emerging within hybrid work arrangements; norms where work and care digitally and materially coexist in overlapping and dynamic ways, rather than being clearly separated or sequential, with no discrete edges or end-times. It is not simply that work extends into hours that may have previously been reserved for family or leisure, but that family work and leisure time punctuate moments of working from home. These evolving expectations around when and how work takes place both enables the coordination of work and care for working parents but does not lessen the cognitive and emotional burden of managing these overlapping demands, nor the role strain that emerges in their collision.

These layered temporal work and care norms are not gender neutral. As I explored in the previous chapter, while many men ‘close the door’ on caregiving during working hours, women remain the emotional and logistical managers of the household. Work-based digitalised presence imposes a similar load. Just as women use digital tools while working from home to manage care, fielding notifications and caring responsibilities as they work, they must also manage their ambient availability to their employer. As such, the home and the workplace are continuous and co-constituted via the digital tools that enable the coordination of care and work, generating an always-on, digitalised landscape that disproportionately burdens women due to the expectation that they concurrently manage both. Like Hochschild’s concept of the second shift, women combine paid work and unpaid care. But unlike the original concept, the second shift may occur at the same time as the first.

I posit that the gendered disparities generated by these emerging temporal norms are not only to do with inequalities in time spent on care and work, particularly as many fathers now participate more actively in routine caregiving. Rather, inequality lies in the cognitive and emotional overload that generates a “crowding out” effect, a type of cognitive overload that constrains how much new information individuals can register and use in conscious activities (Helgøy and Weeks 2025). Women, who are presumed to be responsible for coordinating family life, experience denser and more layered days and a heavier mental load. Expectations of digitalised professional omnipresence adds another layer to the load of care-based tasks and notifications they already manage, not just by stretching work into family time, but by demanding ongoing attentiveness to both. Helgøy and Weeks (2025) find that women who carry a disproportionate cognitive load are less likely to pursue career advancement opportunities or participate in public life. I suggest that this load is intensified by the nature of knowledge work, defined as work that creates value by creating or using knowledge and

understanding, requiring its workers to think for a living, rather than carrying out physical labour (Drucker 1996).

While inclusive worker norms destigmatise caregiving identities in the workplace and offer the opportunity for mothers to participate in full-time employment without having to conceal their identity as mothers, they do not unsettle the disproportionate burden of dense and diffuse labour carried by women. In this sense, domestic gender norms may continue to drive inequalities in the labour market, even if greater flexibility is normalised. Though Anna's husband pauses his working day to collect their children and prepare dinner, participating in his share of the routine childcare and enabling Anna to continue her work until 5pm, Anna's vignette highlights her ongoing additional caregiving: noticing whether homework must be completed, remembering to make cards for Mother's Day, and cleaning and ironing uniforms in anticipation for the next day. This additional, intangible, and ongoing mental load explains why, in the previous chapter, Anna explained that she and her husband had cultivated 'me-time' days for her alone, to counteract the what she describes as "administrative burden" of daily life, work, and care. As I shall explore in the following section, when combined with the shifting expectations around in-person presence, these layered sociomaterial and temporal demands create a growing trade-off for many women: they must choose between sustaining workplace visibility crucial for career advancement or dedicating their limited cognitive and emotional resources to caregiving.

In-Person Presence: The Gendered Rhythms of Hybrid Work in the Office

The previous section explored how the temporal and spatial flexibility enabled by hybrid working arrangements blur work and care in ways that may amplify the role strain experienced by women, even in inclusive working cultures. This section explores how the meaning and practice of in-person presence in the office is reconfigured within hybrid models. Hybrid working arrangements vary widely in their specific configuration. For instance, some parents worked almost entirely at home, only coming to the office once a month, while others attended one or two days a week, and the rest of the time at home. The unique divisions of home and office days were shaped by organisational policy, team dynamics, and individual need, meaning that even individuals on the same team might have different schedules. What united these varied arrangements, however, was a shared understanding that work was no longer assumed to take place in person, in an office, every day, from 9-5.

In this new context, the meaning, value, and purpose of in-person presence shifts, where physical attendance in hybrid workplaces is no longer a daily taken-for-granted expectation. The spatial expectations of hybrid work instead revolve around the ability to appear at pivotal moments such as client meetings, leadership briefings, and informal networking opportunities. While this selectivity lends itself to individualised schedules managed around care responsibilities, it also requires the capacity to coordinate domestic responsibilities around organisational rhythms. Those who are less burdened by the logistical demands of care are thus better positioned to use presence as a means of influence and progression. Though occupational norms may be evolving away from the expected unencumbered ideal worker, jobs themselves may continue to be “greedy” (Goldin 2021), continuing to reward those better able to accommodate organisational demands.

Knowing when it’s important to go in: Presence, progress, and influence

“You don’t have to be there every day,” software engineer Mimi told me. “It’s just being flexible enough to know when it’s important to go in, when most of the stakeholders are going to be having conversations, knowing when your presence is going to be an influence.” Her reflection highlights a broader shift in organisational life that echoed across the decisions and experiences of the parents in this study: daily physical presence is no longer the default expectation, but a resource to be used individually and strategically. Many parents therefore timed their office visits to coincide with key meetings or moments when senior leaders would be present, maximising both their influence in decision-making and their visibility to management. Being able to choose when to be present allows parents to align their in-office time with “when it’s important to go in”, while also protecting time for caregiving at home.

In-person presence, however, remains crucially linked to career progression. For instance, Kyle, an account manager, highlighted the importance of senior leaders who “can vouch for

you, know who you are, respect you, and have visibility on what you're doing" as vital to progression in the "corporate world". "Knowing when it's important to go in" therefore functions as a strategy for workers to access organisational power, which has been defined as the capacity to influence key actors and shape decision-making in service of one's goals and interests (Fleming and Spicer 2014), and career advancement. Amidst the shifting temporal norms that assume a more fragmentary and individualised working day that is interwoven with the management of care, access to organisational power depends less on continuous physical proximity and more on being present at key moments. As highlighted in the previous section, shifting attitudes towards the visibility and integration of caregiving responsibilities at work merge with flexible arrangements to give rise to new ideals that facilitate and expect the dual management of work and care. In this context, the expectation of constant physical availability gives way to a demand for curated visibility at the 'right' times. Although these expectations allow for more flexibility, the underlying expectation that workers must structure their time and availability around the organisation's most valued moments has not disappeared, but have instead been reshaped in ways that appear more inclusive.

While collaborative digital tools facilitate scheduled meetings, asynchronous messages, and collaborative work, they do not replicate the spontaneity or serendipity of meetings at the margins or the "picking up by osmosis": "You don't have an off the cuff conversation via Zoom or Google Meet, because you have to book everything in," explained Anjali. The digital infrastructure that requires that conversations be planned, scheduled, and materialised in advance in one's calendar, while conducive to balancing work and care commitments, was viewed as incompatible with in-person, office-based sociality. And crucially, these informal exchanges are not merely social, but are enacted through the spatial and material arrangements of co-located work, such as open-plan offices, shared break spaces, and overlapping temporal rhythms. These arrangements enable overhearing, interruption, and spontaneous 'joining in'. As Ibarra (1993) argues, informal networks operate outside formal roles, supporting workers' goals through voluntary interactions embedded in the spatial and relational dynamics of office life. Though many work tasks have been translated online, the relational labour involved in developing and sustaining informal professional networks remains grounded in-person interactions.

Linking in-person presence to influence, power, and career advancement has particular gendered implications for working mothers who have taken extended maternity leave. "I went on maternity leave at a pivotal point in the company's life, and it expanded rapidly," Anjali told me. "When I came back, it had doubled in size, and a lot of people had joined when I was away. A lot of people just didn't know who I was. And, now that I am in a slightly more senior position, being able to influence decision making is a big, unspoken part of my job. Yes, my job is based on data and rational decision making, but also, it's based on types and relationships. And like, women – we know that. So being in the office is like being noticed, not feeling invisible anymore, after a period of absence."

Anjali's experience illustrates how extended absences can erode organisational power. This dynamic disproportionately affects women, who are more likely to take long leave after childbirth. Returning to work, according to Anjali, involves not only resuming "rational" work tasks but also rebuilding status and influence through physical presence. Hybrid models can offer mothers more opportunities to be strategically present by allowing them to target pivotal moments rather than maintain constant availability. Yet this reconfiguration does not completely dismantle the logics of "greedy work". While the normalisation of hybrid work and the emergence of inclusive worker norms may soften this by allowing selective visibility, the expectation that influence and career progression is connected to physical presence continues to privilege those whose caregiving responsibilities do not limit their availability. I posit that what becomes more important to consider in the gendered experience of strategic presence is the disparate mental load of coordination carried by mothers and fathers, and how this may continue to shape access to organisational power and influence in uneven ways.

Tarred with the working mum brush: Gendered implications of strategic presence

Hybrid work models enable, to some degree, office attendance to be tailored to individual schedules and caregiving responsibilities. Rather than being bound to a rigid, daily in-office routine or long-hours working cultures, workers can often select the days when their influence will be maximized and when personal obligations are minimal, often working in tandem with their spouses to mix and match office and home days. This tailoring enables parents to plan around school runs, childcare, or other domestic responsibilities, potentially reducing conflict between work and home life and increasing the opportunity to advance their careers. When traditional professional temporal rhythms are de-institutionalised, parents gain the flexibility to coordinate caregiving around work. But, as I explored in Chapter 4, this flexibility also generates a new layer of coordinative labour, as schedules, office attendance, and household responsibilities must be constantly negotiated and aligned. The very act of being present in-person in a hybrid model therefore requires logistical and emotional labour that is gendered in practice, even if gender-neutral in theory.

Yet in workplaces that expect an unencumbered worker, this coordinative labour has a dual purpose: to remain strategically present for spontaneous, career-advantageous social interactions *and* to conceal one's caregiving responsibilities. Mary is a mother of two who works four days a week in a FinTech start-up in Scotland. She explains how she and her husband, Mark, an engineer, coordinate the care of their young children by using their flexible schedules, a mix and match approach, and supplemental support from Mark's parents. Crucially, Mary ensures that her weekly day in the office is free from physical and routine caregiving responsibilities that might conflict with the opportunity to develop informal networks with her colleagues. "I've intentionally done it so that the days I'm in the office, I don't have any childcare responsibilities," she explains, "My husband does that. From experience, I decided it's a good way of not being tarred with the working mum brush. So, I never have to run off for the kids." She adds that if a meeting overruns, or her

colleagues invite her for a drink after work, she can accept the invitation without signalling a competing attachment to the family. By organising childcare on the days that she is most visible to her colleagues, Mary distances herself from the stigmatised, gendered figure of the ‘working mum’, who in traditional ideal worker cultures is culturally associated with reduced availability and compromised commitment.

Mary’s approach to strategic presence extends beyond planning her own visibility; it involves actively coordinating household and childcare responsibilities with her husband: “I’ve just kind of pushed it on my husband, that this is his contribution.” Mary says, referring to the days when she is in the office, and he is responsible for childcare. She recounts how, when her daughter transitioned from nursery into primary school with shorter hours, she drew up a timetable and filled in the slots that she was able to fit with her work schedules. She pointed to the blank spaces and asked her husband: “What are you going to do?” At first, she tells me, he was apprehensive. At the time, his company, a male-dominated engineering firm, only permitted one formal flexible working request per year, which he had already made. Encouraging him to challenge this rule, Mary pushed him to speak to his employer again: “That isn’t how the nurseries or schools work,” she told him. “You’re just going to have to talk to them.” Mary’s story illustrates a broader pattern of gendered coordinative labour, not just an individual choice or preference. Much like the planning meetings of Edward and Elizabeth in Chapter 4, the mix and match childcare schedule of Mary and Mark on the surface appears an egalitarian approach to managing childcare and the demands of a professional career. Yet Mary’s account reveals an underlying dynamic in which she took the initial responsibility for setting up the system.

These coordinative demands are amplified by seniority. Neelam, who was recently promoted to Head of her department, described how progressing in her role, which involved “a fair bit of responsibility”, made the coordination of work and care more difficult. Increasingly expected to attend high-stakes, decision-making meetings with other senior stakeholders, she reflected: “A couple of weeks ago, I was in for three days for meetings, and that took a lot of management to kind of manage it. There’s something about *where* in tech you are in terms of level that makes it more difficult. Especially when the times of meeting clash with the drop-off - unless I get someone to do that, it makes it really difficult and that actual childcare is quite hard to find.” Neelam’s account highlights how increased seniority brings increased expectation to be involved in decision-making spaces, which, even in hybrid models, often unfold through in-person interaction. Yet managing these expectations involves complex logistical planning, particularly for mothers who remain responsible for household logistics. As Neelam says, “it’s like a second job to deal with the life admin.” The demands for coordination are particularly intense for those like Neelam who work amongst male colleagues who do not have responsibility for school drop-offs, and thus do not consider this as a factor when planning meetings.

Managing home at work

Women's strategic presence in professional spaces is often mediated by the persistent demands of care which can follow them via digital technologies. Diana was selected to deliver a webinar by the CEO of her company, and asked to travel into the office to use their video and sound equipment. On the morning of the webinar, Diana makes breakfast for her children, prepares their lunches, and reminds her youngest child to take his asthma inhaler before setting off on a two-hour train journey. Once on the train, she retrieves her laptop from her bag to prepare for her webinar and answer work emails. She also updates an online grocery order and tops up her children's lunch money. Preparation for the webinar is punctuated with family coordination and domestic administration, responsibilities that travel beyond the home via digital technologies. Much like the digital omnipresence of work while working-from-home reported by Anna, the responsibilities of care constitute a digital layer over the experience of in-person work.

At the office, she rehearses the webinar and finalizes her plan. At 3:30pm, she receives a text from her husband to let her know her children have arrived home safely. In the evening, she sits in her hotel room eating the dinner she has bought from Sainsbury's, and video calls her husband. She reminds him to give their youngest child his inhaler and to remind their oldest son to take his asthma tablet. In her diary, she reflects on the calming effect seeing her family on the screen has on her rising levels of anxiety. Diana is an introvert, and public speaking is a challenge for her. "I went to sleep around midnight," she writes. "I felt very stressed and alone." Her reflections on her anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional labour indicate the intertwinement of her physical presence at work with her digital emotional presence at home, which also highlights how her family is a vital source of emotional support to her *while also* generating many layers of extra labour.

In the morning, she wakes up after a night of interrupted sleep and reminds her husband about their youngest's inhaler again, before practicing with her notes in the mirror. The webinar kicks off at 11am and is a resounding success. Afterwards, Diana receives several Teams messages from colleagues congratulating her, and she is proud of the positive feedback she receives. But later in the afternoon, she checks her trains and realises they have all been cancelled. To travel home, she must take a different train that stops 30 minutes from her town and then call a taxi. By the time she arrives home after 8pm, she is exhausted. After a quick catch up with her husband and sons, she falls asleep at 9pm.

Diana's story highlights the complex realities and meanings of in-person presence in hybrid working arrangements. She manages not only logistics, but emotion, professional esteem, and caregiving from a distance. In hybrid workplaces, presence operates as a way of signalling influence, embedding oneself in decision-making networks, and accessing mentorship. Though strategic presence may appear a gender-neutral practice, it requires a deeply gendered capacity to manage and coordinate a household around this physical presence. Though many women value the office as a segmented space, organising strategic presence

contributes a new layer of labour: the labour of coordination, emotional regulation, and the careful planning required to make these appearances possible. Furthermore, while strategic presence offers a pathway to influence and advancement, the intense demands of coordinating presence for working mothers leads some to consciously step back from pursuing career progression while their children are young.

Elizabeth shared a vivid example of the difficult conversations and trade-offs involved:

“I was offered this job at this VC [Venture Capital] firm for £200,000 a year and me and Edward had to sit down and have a conversation about that... he said, ‘If you want to go for it, we’ll make it work. If you’re earning that amount of money, you get a fucking nanny, like you know what I mean? There are things we could do to make it work. So, I don’t want you to not take it because of logistical reasons.’ But I thought a lot about it, and actually, if that role is coming up now, there is a chance that role will be available when Toby doesn’t need me as much. So I’m going to continue to put Toby first and then the family and that dynamic first.”

Elizabeth’s resistance to the idea of outsourcing care demonstrates how working from home and arranging work around care is not simply about cognitive “logistics”, but about the intimate and emotional sense of being present with children. Working from home enables Elizabeth to continue to “put the family first” while avoiding the need to take a complete career break to care for her young child. Similarly, Anna tells me that to pursue career advancement, she would have to travel to London to participate in networking and social opportunities but that while her children were young, she preferred to work predominantly from home. Fathers also shared this sentiment. Kyle described himself as “less career focused” since he had children, and that his desire to progress at work had been overtaken by his desire to focus on his family. Like Anna, he predicted that he would “switch back once they’re older”.

Ultimately, what these accounts reveal is that the link between in-person presence and career progression effectively forces hybrid working parents to make a “constrained choice” (Williams 2001) between advancing their careers and dedicating time to their children. With limited hours in the day, parents can choose strategic presence with their employer, or with their families - at important board meetings, or at the school gates. The gendered expectation that mothers remain the emotional and logistical manager of the home, and that bad mothers are those who deviate from this role, means that this decision may be experienced more intensely for women than men, though nascent involved fathering norms also shape the decisions made by men. This dynamic demonstrates that hybrid working arrangements reconfigure, rather than resolve, longstanding tensions between work and family commitments, particularly for women who often carry the burden for the logistical management of the home. On one hand, hybrid work can offer improved outcomes for working women and primary caregivers by allowing them to remain in full-time employment

during early parenthood. On the other hand, it risks creating a two-tier workplace (Chung 2022) – those who actively pursue career development by attending the office more frequently may gain greater visibility, influence, and decision-making power, while those prioritising caregiving and spending more time working remotely may face limited progression opportunities. This binary underscores how hybrid work can simultaneously expand flexibility, enabling working parents to access full-time work, and also perpetuate gendered inequalities in career advancement and embed an ‘always-on’ expectation.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how hybrid working models reproduce, unsettle, and reconfigure gendered occupational norms. I showed how gendered organisational cultures intersect with digital technologies to shape the visibility of care, how hybrid flexibility at home blurs the boundaries between paid and unpaid labour, and how hybrid in-person presence in the office offers women more opportunities to progress their full-time careers but ultimately continues to reward those less burdened by care. It is important to highlight that hybrid work can also support new inclusive worker norms by legitimising caregiving identities and enabling mothers to remain in full-time employment without concealing their roles at home, and to attend only ‘important’ meetings in-person rather than all meetings. Therefore, I argue that while the normalisation of hybrid work can replace the traditional ideal worker norm with a flexible model that is partly more inclusive, it can also embed new spatial and temporal expectations that implicitly depend on gendered inequalities in cognitive and emotional labour.

In some organisations, ideal worker norms continue to stigmatise visible caring responsibilities, while offering working parents the opportunity to conceal these caregiving responsibilities using digital technologies. However, the labour of concealment, perception management, and the burden of shame, layer to contribute to an overwhelming load for both mothers and primary carer fathers, who must discretely coordinate childcare whilst enacting an ideal worker persona. I suggest that the concept of the mental load (Dean et al. 2022), which refers to the layering of domestic cognitive and emotional labour to generate the sense of an exhausting, layered ‘load’, can also be productively applied in a hybrid working context to illustrate how the stigmatisation of caregiving identities requires that caregivers undertake extra labour in flexible work arrangements. Tara’s management of her employer’s perception of her as a working mother, her own emotional experience of shame at not meeting his expectations, coupled with the simultaneous coordination and concealment of her children’s care produce an exhausting load and a disproportionate burden of stress. As Helgøy and Weeks (2025) propose, the uneven mental load is linked to ongoing structural inequalities between men and women, because it has a “crowding out” effect on women’s capacity to pursue career advancement and participate in public life. Indeed, Tara shared her desire to find a new job that generated less work-life conflict during our interview, a desire that was limited by her struggles to find the time and energy to do so.

In other organisations, a supportive work-family culture enables the integration of caring responsibilities into legitimate professional identities, constituting a new inclusive worker norm. Rather than using digital technologies to conceal one's caring responsibilities, parents in these organisational cultures use digital technologies like calendars to both visibly perform their identities as parents as well as to share the labour of coordination amongst colleagues. In this way, visibility becomes a resource for working parents, rather than a risk. The attitudes and life experiences of managers play a central role in reinforcing and amplifying an organisation's normative expectations around visibility and presence. In supportive cultures, managers role model the active participation in caregiving to normalise the visibility of care. However, this can leave working parents vulnerable to management change.

What these disparate organisational gender cultures share are shifting spatio-temporal professional norms. Across these cases, hybrid workers perform continuous coordinative labour to align their personal, organisational, and digital worlds. While flexibility appears to grant autonomy, it depends on these hidden acts of alignment - work that remains unevenly distributed and feminised. In this sense, the hybrid workplace relies on the very labour that Chapter 4 identified within the home. Hybrid workers expect leaky boundaries between work and life where, rather than being sequentially segmented, work and care occur simultaneously via an always-on digital environment of reminders and communication channels to both the employer and the family, no matter their physical location. The rising prevalence of hybrid work has therefore not only begun to shift *where* work happens but has entangled with shifting normative expectations about how work can and should integrate with the rest of life on a spatio-temporal scale. I propose that rather than assuming that all organisations reproduce ideal worker norms through their digital work practices, that new inclusive worker norms (Müller and Chung 2025) are emerging. While this norm enables parents to visibly manage their care and work responsibilities in a seemingly more inclusive workplace, I suggest that it can also mask the persistent gendered inequalities in the cognitive and emotional responsibilities for the home that continue to shape who can sustain the levels of digital omnipresence and strategic in-person presence that contemporary work and care demands.

Within this landscape, the hybrid ideal worker may be a parent who is transparent about their caregiving responsibilities. But what enables them to meet new norms around in-person or digital visibility is not only the absence of time spent on caregiving. Instead, it is the absence of responsibility for coordinating it. As I will explore in the following chapter, when men earn more than their partners, their careers are more likely to be prioritised and their working time protected from the ad hoc and unpredictable needs of care. This grants them the power to “not notice” (Daminger 2019) and “not coordinate” the invisible labour of care. Hybrid work rewards those who are structurally and culturally less overloaded by the logistical, temporal, and emotional demands of care. It is a system that recognises and celebrates parenthood and routine care, such as the male managers who take their children swimming,

but not necessarily the invisible and continuous coordinative labour that is required to make it work – the person who plans, books, and packs for the lessons.

For women, the load of care is not only externally imposed but internalised, as cultural expectations around ‘good’ motherhood gives rise to “mum guilt” if care feels insufficiently coordinated. This may contribute to a dynamic where women remain in the workforce and are able to integrate their caregiving identities into their professional identities without stigma, but make the “constrained choice” not to progress as they decide to prioritise family over physical presence in an office. In *Unbending Gender*, Williams (2001) labels part-time work a “pyrrhic victory” that “mommy-tracks” women into flatlining careers and consequentially re-embeds their primary roles as mothers and caretakers. I argue that hybrid work creates new conditions for gender equality, but only for those who can manage its demands. The same flexibility that enables working mothers to remain in the workforce full-time may also be the reason they do not advance, a similarly pyrrhic victory that brings new demands and expectations on the time and cognitive capacities of working women.

Therefore, even if caregiving is destigmatised at work, the gendered structure of household management and the feminisation of coordinative, managerial care must be the focus of reform if that is the mechanism that may drive women’s choice to ‘opt-out’ of pursuing career progression. Otherwise, cognitive inequalities will be amplified even as they are hidden by seemingly inclusive, flexible policies that celebrate the integration of care. Doucet and Klostermann (2023) push for assessing gender equality through changes in the gendered responsibility for work and care across time, rather than the dominant focus on measuring time and tasks. They argue that despite the shifts in the time spent on caregiving tasks, the responsibilities for caregiving and breadwinning remain resistant to change. Building on this, I argue that without addressing the gendered labour of coordination, which is most often distributed based on who is culturally presumed to be ultimately responsible for the logistical and emotional wellbeing of the family, hybrid work may appear inclusive while continuing to reproduce structural inequalities in both professional and domestic spheres.

Chapter 6

The Hybrid Society: How Social, Organisational, and Institutional Policy Shapes the Gendered Organisation of Work and Care

Introduction

Over the course of conducting interviews with parents, it became clear that an examination of how men and women organised hybrid work would be incomplete without considering the role of the broader social context. This chapter therefore examines how the UK's structural context shapes the gendered experience and division of paid and unpaid labour in dual-earner, hybrid working households. Drawing on interviews with parents, I focus on three interconnected areas: parental leave policies, childcare provision, and organisational return to office (RTO) mandates. Across these domains, I show how gaps in policy support generate a greater demand for coordinative labour, the ongoing work of aligning care, paid work, and institutional requirements, which is disproportionately absorbed at the household level and predominantly by women. I supplement my interviews with insights drawn from an analysis of UK social policy and contemporary media narratives to do with home-based work and childcare.

Overall, I argue that hybrid work does not automatically resolve gendered inequalities in caregiving. Instead, it functions as a temporary buffer for managing work and care, primarily accessible to professional dual-earner couples with sufficient autonomy to mix and match office and home days. This flexibility allows them to stitch together individualised strategies for managing work and care in a context of weak structural support, meaning that it is particularly important for the participation of women in the labour market. These strategies, however, disproportionately rely on mothers' coordinative labour and remain vulnerable to shifts in organisational policy. Therefore, I posit that policy constraints produce further demand for coordinative labour by increasing the need for parents to individually assemble and coordinate patchworks of care.

Ultimately, I argue that without more substantial policy and institutional support, flexible working arrangements alone will not dismantle the unequal divisions of paid and unpaid labour that arise at parenthood. While there is evidence of a gradual normative shift towards more care-oriented ways of organising work and life - as demonstrated by the firms who resist RTO mandates and by parents using hybrid work to cultivate quality time, intimacy, and togetherness - these small shifts remain precarious. Without stronger structural support, they risk being confined to privileged households, overly dependent on the feminised labour of coordination, and easily undermined by the reassertion of ideal worker cultures.

Gendered Social Policy: Parental Leave

Maternity and paternity leave in the UK

Becoming a mother carries well-documented career penalties (Budig and England 2001). In the UK, men and women make the same investments in education and have similar career trajectories up until the point of having children (Andrew et al. 2024). Though the average earnings of women are slightly lower than men's before children, it is at parenthood that significant gaps appear. While the average earnings of men are almost completely unaffected by parenthood, women's earnings fall precipitously when they become parents, and then stabilise at a much lower level (Francis-Devine et al. 2025). In the UK, the gender pay gap is predominantly caused by women working shorter hours and receiving less per hour than men, rather than because women exit the labour market at higher rates than men (Andrew et al. 2024). In other words, mothers in the UK tend to work part-time and be employed at a less senior or highly paid level as men. As highlighted by economists Andrew et al (2024), these gaps demonstrate the crucial role of uneven divisions of unpaid care in shaping inequalities in the labour market. These broader trends in the labour market are echoed in the stories of my participants: many women described putting their careers "on ice" during maternity leave and while raising young children. Fathers were not ignorant to this dynamic - as pointed out by one man, "it is often the mother's career that suffers" – but often felt limited in their capacity to enact change.

These socioeconomic trends are closely linked to the UK's parental leave system, which heavily skews towards mothers taking long maternal leave and fathers taking comparatively short paternal leave. Parental leave entitlements in the United Kingdom are of shorter duration than across other OECD countries and at a relatively low financial compensation (OECD 2023). In the UK, employed women are entitled to 52 weeks of statutory maternity leave. The first 6 weeks of this leave are paid at 90% of weekly average earnings, followed by 33 weeks at a lower flat payment rate (UK Government n.d.-b). The final 13 weeks of statutory leave are unpaid, though employers may offer enhanced maternity pay that extends compensation into this time.

Paternity leave, by contrast, is much shorter: fathers in the UK are entitled to two weeks of paid paternity leave, significantly less when compared to the OECD-average of 10 weeks. Despite the egalitarian intentions of individual men and women to equally share work and care, the structural constraints created by gendered social policy such as parental leave can force women into career interruptions, with significant consequences for labour market participation and career progression (Wong 2023). As I explore in this chapter, even with the introduction of ostensibly gender-neutral leave policies such as Shared Parental Leave (SPL), the UK's policy landscape remains "maternally-oriented" (Banister and Kerrane 2024: 11). Particularly when combined with unsupportive or actively discriminatory workplace cultures, these maternally oriented parental leave policies create a structural context where the 'path of

least resistance' can funnel couples into traditionally gendered work–family configurations at the point of having children, with further implications for labour market participation

“I’ve had two children, so my career graph has always been slower than my contemporaries. It’s not to be blamed that I became pregnant, but I did lose two years of working life,” Nisha, a forty-one-year-old mother of two who works in a biotech company, explained. “I’ve been surrounded by men who don’t have childcare responsibilities, and they have a much quicker career path.” Aligning with broader analyses of the labour market participation of mothers, Nisha connects her “slower” career progression with both her periods of maternity leave and her ongoing competing childcare responsibilities. Crucially, she highlights the caregiving role of motherhood, rather than her gender, as the cause of her slower progression “The women who are doing a lot better in my field do not have children and are not married [...] there’s a crunch point where I have to step back because I have children, and I probably wouldn’t be taking a role that requires a lot of travelling or long hours, even though I would like to reach vice president level.”

In contrast, Nisha tells me that her husband remains at the “top” of his career trajectory, illustrating how gendered parental leave policies interact with household responsibilities to produce divergent career outcomes, and echoing Goldin’s (2021) findings on “greedy jobs”. Goldin demonstrates that greedy jobs are those that reward continuous, inflexible, and time-intensive labour with higher pay and status, creating structural incentives for one partner to prioritise availability at work while the other absorbs the demands of care. The premium attached to long, uninterrupted hours means that even small career breaks translate into lasting wage and promotion gaps. In this way, the slower progression Nisha describes is shaped by the enduring architecture of greedy work, where organisational success is built on the presumption of an unencumbered worker, combined with the gendered structure of parental leave in the UK. Though both Nisha and her husband work full-time, Nisha feels that her role and responsibilities as a mother have limited the progress she is able to make. Even when couples hold egalitarian intentions and similar career goals, structural and cultural constraints channel women into career interruptions with lasting consequences for labour. Scholars describe this dynamic as structural lag (Wong, 2023) or the gender-equality paradox (Usdansky, 2011), where structural pressures can outweigh individual desires. For instance, as Usdansky (2011), discovered, middle class couples voiced egalitarian values but were ultimately pushed into less egalitarian arrangements by structural and professional constraints.

Across my participants, many fathers also reflected on the disparity caused by the structures they encountered. Kyle compared his three-week paternity leave with his partner’s twelve-month maternity leave: “It is much more difficult for women who take maternity leave – there’s a lot of stuff that changes. She works in sales, and some accounts were like, rotated away from her, so it was challenging. Her company were supportive when she raised concerns, but yeah, there’s a huge difference between twelve months and three weeks.”

Though Kyle implies that his wife's experience was an inevitable result of the combination of long periods of leave and the features of her particular sales role, software engineer Cora also described returning to work after maternity leave to find that her team were working in a new tech stack, including a programming language she was unfamiliar with, for which she received little training. In these scenarios, women returning from maternity leave must actively advocate for their skill and career development, whereas Kyle described returning from paternity leave as like "coming back from a long holiday" due to its short length.

While fathers returned quickly to their careers after short period of leave, mothers' extended leave often meant that while they lost organisational knowledge, they developed detailed knowledge and routines around childcare and household management, which positioned them as the default coordinators of family life even once the leave period had ended. Following the exposure hypothesis, some sociologists have suggested that spending more time in the home increases fathers' exposure to domestic work and may lead men to become more familiar and comfortable with these tasks, potentially leading to more time spent in domestic work (Carlson, Petts, and Pepin 2021).

Yet in practice, even if men work from home, it is mothers on maternity leave who typically spend the far greater share of time with infants, deepening their familiarity, comfort, and skill levels with the work of managing family life. In part, this explains how the uneven division of the cognitive, coordinative, and emotional labour becomes embedded. In Chapter 4, Lucas and Lydia collaborate on the weekly shopping list between his working tasks, but it is Lydia who prepares meals in advance for Lucas's solo parenting time, and Lydia who initiates their planning session. Between Tara and Tom, it is Tara who is "better at remembering" recipes for their children's meals. As Tom reflected, "I think naturally, at the moment, the balance [of housework and childcare] is a bit more on Tara, and I think maternity leave contributes to that, where one party is working and the other one isn't. So, you know, that always brings about a bit of an unequal balance." Rather than the ability to remember, know, plan, and care being an essentialised trait held by all women, it is a skill developed during long periods of leave. And, as explored previously, this unequal division of coordinative labour, plus cognitive and emotional labour more generally, is not unsettled by access to more flexibility – in some cases, it is exacerbated.

Stigma and discrimination whilst on maternity leave

While deepening women's responsibility and skill in family coordination and caregiving, long periods of maternity leave simultaneously expose them to risks and discrimination in the workplace that stem from the normative expectations of ideal worker cultures and greedy jobs. Beyond the structural constraints of parental leave, women in my sample also described encountering career discrimination during and just after their maternity leave that compounded the impact of motherhood on their professional progression. As well as the loss of job experience during maternity leave, Budig and England (2001) highlight the

discrimination of mothers by employers, such as in hiring practices, reduced training opportunities, and lower wages, as one of the key drivers of the motherhood penalty. I extend this by suggesting that such workplace discrimination generates an additional mental load: as discussed in the previous chapter, when caregiving is stigmatised at work, women must perform extra labour to conceal their caregiving responsibilities while working from home.

Abigail, now a product manager in a FemTech company, described being demoted while in a previous corporate role during her maternity leave: “My boss left the company, and essentially I was demoted.” She explained that she felt that this had happened *because* she had been on maternity leave, rather than being present in the office. “It affected two other members of my team, but I was the only one on maternity leave. They were moved, but they didn’t get demoted. One of them even got promoted! I started a grievance process, but I had a very small baby at the time, and I didn’t feel like I had the energy to go through with it.” Abigail’s account underscores how her maternity leave left her vulnerable to discriminatory treatment, which she was unable to resist due to the physical and emotional depletion of childbirth and caring for a young infant. In a context where extended leave is stigmatised as deviating from the ideal worker norm, women’s absences are at risk of being treated as career liabilities, while men’s shorter, socially accepted leave periods leave their trajectories largely uninterrupted. Combined with ongoing responsibility for the reproductive labour of family life that becomes embedded during this period, this dual burden compounds career penalties for mothers.

Linda, who has worked in sales in several tech firms, describes a similar pattern of pressure and sidelining after her maternity leave, exacerbated by the exhaustion of new motherhood and a colicky baby. She recalled her manager at the time visiting her house to push her to return to work after six months: “I remember my boss coming here to the house, pressurizing me to come back. And I remember him arriving and she [her baby] was just screaming. And she did not stop screaming the whole time. And I think he left with his nerves jangled. I just wasn’t coping.” Linda went on to describe how the pressure placed on her to return to her role developed into a systematic discrimination that impacted not only her, but thirteen other women pregnant at a similar time. “On paper, [the employer] had good maternity benefits, et cetera. I was one of 14 in the bump club, all having babies. They managed us all out within a year. It was a really shitty experience.” She recalled how they were strategically pushed out by being placed in roles that guaranteed failure: “We were put in a position where it felt like you were going to be managed out for performance, because they weren’t setting you up for success, and they basically offered you a payoff. I just took the money because I wasn’t welcome, and I wasn’t happy.”

Layering with the systematic pressure and discrimination Linda faced at work was her sense of guilt for leaving her six-month-old baby with a full-time nanny so that she could return to work: “It was just a horrible time. I felt guilt leaving her, but I didn’t want to give up my career because I’d invested a lot in it and I was feeling the pressure.” Taken together, Abigail

and Linda's accounts illuminate how maternity leave can function as a critical juncture at which point women are repositioned within organisations, through demotion, exclusion, or systematic "managing out". Beyond the temporary loss of work experience, some women faced active organisational barriers to progression once they became mothers, with long term consequences for pay and career trajectories. At the same time, the cultural expectations of intensive motherhood and the embodied exhaustion of early childcare heighten women's vulnerability to such discrimination, leaving them doubly penalised – both by the pressures of the workplace, and by the pressures of care.

Sharing the load: Structural and cultural barriers

The male partners of women facing career breaks and active discrimination often felt frustrated but helpless at the divergent impact that parenthood had on their careers when compared with their partners. One man recounted that his wife found it "painful" to take time out of her career, and that he attributed this to the "ungenerous" leave policy at his workplace: "I was miffed, and I let them know." Uniquely in the sample, he and his wife worked at the same organisation, where prior to becoming parents, she had been "one rung above" him. After becoming parents, his career "skyrocketed", whilst hers took a "backseat", illustrating how on the other side of the coin to the motherhood penalty often lies the fatherhood premium (Hodges and Budig 2010). Yet despite this fatherhood premium, this father's account indicates his lack of bargaining power in matters of leave, even when "miffed" with these structural barriers. Ultimately, his wife left the company and took on a full-time, high-level position in a consulting firm.

Introduced in 2015, the Shared Parental Leave (SPL) policy is aimed at addressing these inequalities in leave by enabling couples to share 50 of the 52 weeks of maternity leave with the father or co-parent, thereby evening out the duration of leave entitlements. This leave can be taken continuously or discontinuously, and fathers can transfer the leave back to mothers (Mitchell 2023). Yet while SPL is explicitly aimed at promoting greater gender equal parenting by encouraging fathers to take more leave (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011), it has been widely described as failing to achieve these aims due to the extremely low take up amongst parents; only 5% of eligible fathers have utilised it (Department for Business, Enterprise & Industrial Strategy 2023). This low take-up cannot be solely attributed to cultural gender norms around who should be the primary parent. Instead, the barriers preventing couples from adopting SPL stem from both deficiencies in the policy design itself, and in the constraining role of organisational implementation (Atkinson 2017; Mitchell 2023). I suggest that this results in a context where parents are discouraged from adopting SPL, leading them instead to continue to rely on gendered maternity and paternity leave policies that reproduce traditional divisions of labour and responsibility in the home and workplace.

Organisations are not simply conduits for policy, but active implementors who can play a supportive or constraining role in the uptake of family-friendly policy. Twamley and Schober (2019) find that a key barrier to the uptake of SPL are unsupportive workplace cultures that view maternity leave as non-negotiable, but paternity leave as optional, contributing to fears around potential risks to the male partner's career and financial loss should they request SPL. For example, Neelam described her husband's workplace as "very family-friendly" yet, when it came to taking the new SPL policy introduced, both felt concerned about the potential impact it could have on his perception at work, saying, "I don't know how it could be viewed." Beyond normative gendered perceptions of leave-taking at work, Neelam also pointed out that SPL is, "logistically and admin wise, an absolute nightmare from a HR perspective". Research has found that many parents simply do not know that SPL is an option with workplaces failing to mention their eligibility for the policy, leading mothers to default to taking all maternity leave and reinforcing the perception that fathers' leave was not a real option (Twamley 2024). Cultural stigmas and bureaucratic barriers can, in part, explain the low take-up of SPL from an organisational perspective.

Beyond organisational barriers, the UK's SPL policy itself continues to position fathers as secondary carers. Though gender-neutral in name, scholars have argued its policy design of SPL renders it, in essence, a transferable maternity leave policy (Atkinson 2017; Faircloth 2023; Mitchell 2023). Because the transference of leave depends on women "giving up" her leave, SPL continues to position the mother as primary carer and gatekeeper of care (Birkett and Forbes 2019). Furthermore, there are numerous structural hurdles to its uptake that significantly constrain parents' ability to use SPL. Perhaps most crucially, the low flat rate of SPL is less than the minimum wage, which may deter uptake amongst men, firstly because fathers are often the higher earners of the household, and secondly because women are more likely to be eligible for enhanced maternity pay from their employer which they would lose if they decided to use SPL. Sharing maternity leave with the father may therefore leave the couple at a financial loss and, as Mitchell (2022) points out, very few families can afford to sacrifice enhanced maternity pay. This feature of the UK's SPL policy essentially acts as a financial penalty or disincentive for couples to share care, despite the purportedly egalitarian aims. Additionally, scholars have highlighted the lack of flexibility in the policy (Mitchell 2022) and the stringent eligibility criteria (Atkinson 2017) as significant barriers to its uptake. Unlike maternity leave, which can be requested from day one of employment, employees must have at least twenty-six weeks continuous employment to be eligible for SPL. Overall, the policy design erects barriers to couples who wish to share leave. As Machin (2015) finds in her study of new fathers in the UK, policy often only pays 'lip service' to the caring role of fathers in the early stages of a baby's life and instead continues to relegate them to the role of supporter and economic provider.

Critics of the UK's SPL policy compare it with more successful shared parental leave policies in Nordic countries like Sweden and Iceland (Atkinson 2017; Mitchell 2023). The key difference is that, rather than being transferable, these parental policies offer non-transferable

periods of leave (also known as ‘use it or lose it’ quotas) that are reserved specifically for fathers, and offer a higher level of compensation (Atkinson 2017; Shand 2018). For instance, in Sweden and Iceland, men’s uptake of the policy is 90%, whereas in Denmark and Slovenia which do not offer a non-transferable quota, the percentage is much lower (24% and 6% respectively) (Shand 2018). Echoing the sentiment shared across the literature, an EU study proposes that if a portion of leave is not specifically reserved for fathers and paid according to salary, few men will take it, thus placing the responsibility for caring overwhelmingly on the mother (Shand 2018). Even in Nordic countries, parental leave that is available to both parents is generally used by mothers, highlighting the crucial importance of fathers’ quotas that are lost if not taken (Haas and Rostgaard 2011). Furthermore, adequate pay is essential: uptake of paternity leave in Estonia increased from 14% to 50% after benefits rose to 100% of earnings (Shand 2018). What these differences highlight is the vital role played by intentional policy design in incentivising parents to take more leave and, more broadly, to enact family models closer to their individually held ideals.

Across my sample, only two couples reported taking SPL. This rarity highlights how deeper structural and cultural barriers continue to limit fathers’ participation in early caregiving, even when egalitarian views are expressed. It also highlights the position of economic privilege of these couples, who were able to rely on savings and the earnings of the female partner while men took low-paid periods of SPL. Parents in the study who were able to utilise SPL policies characterised their decision as exemplifying their commitment to an egalitarian partnership. For instance, Kim pointed out that, “the fact that we took Shared Parental Leave at time when adoption of that was so low, I guess demonstrates that we really wanted to try to meet halfway, to create an equilibrium.” Similarly, Shruti noted how taking SPL enabled her husband to build skills and confidence to do with childrearing. After taking ten months of leave, Shruti shared her final two months with her husband while she returned to her work: “It had a massive impact [...] having months made him much more confident to look after our son. It’s my personal opinion that there’s not, like, a maternal instinct. I think it’s about how much time you’re spending together. Obviously, I had a lot more time, but having that grounding foundation for him was really good.” Rather than simply reflecting their commitment to egalitarianism, sharing leave enabled Shruti and her partner to embed the practical routines and knowledge required to enable sharing. In the previous chapter, their more collaborative approach to work-family coordination was evident.

Policy structures and normative gender roles are difficult to disentangle and often create a mutually reinforcing work-family arena. Gendered leave policies do not just funnel women into roles as caregivers - they also position men as the main breadwinner of the household. Amongst my participants, it was common for men to earn at least a slightly higher wage than their female partners. Many couples made decisions that prioritised the male partner’s career in their leave decisions and once children were born. Goldin describes a similar phenomenon amongst highly educated couples in the US, where one partner commits to a time-consuming job and the other makes career sacrifices to maximise the family’s overall potential income

(Goldin 2021). This division is gendered, with women opting for lower-paid and less time-intensive roles to care for children. For many couples, the price of “couple equity” (Goldin 2021: p205) – i.e. the egalitarian division of paid work and unpaid care – is simply too high to pay, even if both hold egalitarian ideals.

The stakes of these decisions are magnified in sectors experiencing instability and, from the summer of 2022, the tech sector, where the majority of my interviewees were drawn from, experienced extensive cuts, layoffs, and uncertainty as a result of rising inflation and interest rates (Christian 2024). Decisions to take up policies such as SPL, which might be perceived negatively and pose a risk to the male partner’s career, were even less likely to occur. Even when SPL had been adopted, the likelihood for men to earn more continues to shape whose career is prioritised. Kim explained this balance in her own household, where she works as a consultant whilst pursuing her PhD and he works in an Advertising Tech firm:

“Economically, his job is more important. I mean, they’re both *important*, but on balance, his job security is kind of more important.” Her flexible work arrangements, coupled with this financial prioritisation, means she often takes on extra childcare when needed – such as when children are sick – though otherwise they adopt a mix-and-match approach so that she can also dedicate time to her career. This financial prioritisation of men’s careers may also partially justify many men’s ‘closed-door’ approach to care-based interruptions and notifications, rendering women’s working time more flexible and more ‘interruptible’.

Ironically, the egalitarian ethos of fairness and equality that many couples strive to uphold can itself justify the gendered patterns of domestic labour, childcare, and workforce participation that begin at maternity leave. Elizabeth explained how she and Edward navigated the balance between childcare and earning power: “So, as I always tell Edward, it’s not 100% fair, I definitely do the bulk of the childcare. But Edward earns more money. So there’s value in both things – we both bring a certain amount of value into the relationship.” Similarly, Anjali reflected on how relative earnings shaped household decisions: “My promotion in April definitely allowed me to be more 50/50 [with childcare and housework] than I had previously allowed myself to be, because it put our salaries at par. It made me feel more justified in saying this will also be 50/50.” Women who are pushed into traditional divisions of labour at home therefore find ways to reconcile these unequal divisions of labour within their egalitarian values by viewing their domestic labour as on a par with their husband’s financial contribution to the home. As Hochschild and Machung (2012) theorise, couples develop ‘gender strategies’ to “solve the problems at hand given the cultural notions of gender at play” (p15), and these strategies allow such tensions to coexist. Yet these gender strategies individualise the burden of structural inequalities, rather than the organisational or policy context being held accountable for these inequities. Women must negotiate, justify, and absorb the unequal share of care and domestic labour, only approaching parity if their earnings match their partner’s, while men’s participation in care is constrained by the structural and cultural expectation that their work remains prioritised.

Nurseries and Afterschool Care: Barriers to Access

The high cost of nurseries

As Doucet and McKay (2020) argue, simply giving fathers more generous leave is not a “magic solution” to gender inequality, in part because parent’s decisions about who takes leave, for how long, and how they return to work are deeply shaped by the cost, availability, and quality of childcare when leave ends. Childcare is expensive in the UK: a dual-earner couple on average spend 20% of their income on childcare, making the UK the second most expensive for childcare in the OECD (Pearce and Kelly 2025). Many participants in this study spoke about the “eye-watering” cost of private nurseries, which they compared to the cost of their mortgages. For example, Kate reported that sending her child to nursery five days a week in Oxford cost her and her partner around £2000 per month. “I find it considerably expensive,” she said, explaining that “we rely on both salaries to pay this.” However, Kate’s full-time privatised childcare arrangement was unusual within my sample, though necessary because the couple lived in a different city from her partner’s family, and a different country from her own. Most other families in the sample cobbled together a patchwork of care, relying on a mix of private and state-funded nursery hours depending on the age of their children, support from grandparents and other extended family, and their own dual flexible working arrangements to cover the care of their children.

Since 2005, children aged three and above have been entitled to 30 hours of free childcare if both parents are working and have an income higher than the equivalent of the national minimum wage. While this bridged some gaps in childcare provision, it clearly left a significant gap in provision for children under the age of three. As Helgøy and Weeks (2025) point out, this often resulted in one parent scaling back their working hours in order to compensate for this lack of care provision. For both structural and cultural reasons, the parent who reduced their labour market participation was most often mothers – 36% of women in employment worked part-time in 2024, compared with 14% of men (Francis-Devine et al. 2025). This reduction in hours represents not only a short-term loss of income but also a long-term weakening of women’s labour market attachment and career progression, further contributing to the motherhood penalty in the UK.

However, in the 2023 Spring Budget, the Conservative Party announced a significantly expanded childcare provision which provides 30 hours of free childcare to eligible families with children aged nine months to three years, which the Labour Party have committed to honour (Foster 2025). The provision was fully rolled out in September 2025. Providing free childcare hours from the age of nine months allows parents to access up to 30 hours of free childcare from the end of maternity leave. This expansion is explicitly designed to support working parents – mothers, in particular – who face difficult choices between returning to work and meeting high childcare costs, signalling an awareness from the UK Government about the impact poor childcare provision has on the labour market participation of women

(Foster 2025). Discussing these policy changes, Amelia said, “It’s the right thing to do, to help with the stress of having to pay for childcare and the extortionate amounts that you pay in central London.” To manage the cost of nursery fees for her youngest child, Amelia and Amir currently send him to nursery for two and a half days per week. On the half day, Amelia works compressed hours to collect him, and on the two non-nursery days, they rely on support from Amelia’s mother and Amir’s father. “Next year, he gets his free hours,” she tells me, “It’s a big milestone in terms of the cost of childcare. So, then we’ll do a bit more nursery hours.” On days that he is in nursery, Amelia and Amir mix and match their office days to manage his drop offs and pick-ups.

However, the Government’s childcare provision still leaves significant gaps that must be supplemented by individual families. While the 30-hour offer is positioned in policy as allowing mothers to increase their working hours (Foster 2025), it does not align with standard full-time working hours, assuming a 37.5 hour working week. Furthermore, government funding only covers 38 weeks of the year, meaning that for 14 weeks care must either be paid for privately or met by the family (UK Government n.d.-a). Each childcare provider has a different approach to the government scheme - some providers offer stretched hours across the entire year, which can be used either as shorter daily care (e.g. 9am – 3pm), or as 2 or 3 full days per week. Additionally, access to free childcare funding can only start on three specific dates at the start of each term – 1st January; 1st April; and 1st September. This means that, for instance, if a child turns nine months old on 1st September, they would not be eligible for funded hours until 1st January (UK Government n.d.-a).

Full-time nursery care therefore can still represent a significant monthly cost even when the 30 free hours are used, or else still require one or both parents to adjust their working schedule to accommodate the nursery schedule. For many hybrid working parents, this involves working from home, pausing work to collect their child at 3pm, and continuing with their work once their child is asleep or cared for by their partner. This system often relies on both parents having hybrid work arrangements, such as in Amelia and Amir’s mix and match approach, so that they can manage all pick-ups and drop-offs without scaling their hours back to part-time. Yet, despite the increased flexibility of hybrid arrangements, many women in the sample had adopted or were still working a four-day working week or compressed hours to balance these early years childcare constraints with their careers, suggesting that mothers are still primarily the ones expected to flex their careers around childcare.

Adding another layer of complexity, many nurseries claim that government funding does not cover the true cost of provision. To make up the shortfall, nurseries often ask parents to pay so-called ‘top up fees’ for extras such as meals, nappies, or extended hours (Kellow 2021). While the government states that top up fees are optional, news outlets like The BBC and The Guardian report significant confusion from parents about whether or not they must pay these fees, with reports of parents overpaying fees that they assumed were mandatory (Hickey 2025). The UK charity Pregnant Then Screwed found that almost a quarter of parents said

they could not afford to access free nursery hours due to the top up fees charged by nurseries (Pregnant Then Screwed 2024). The charity's founder, activist Joeli Brealey, acknowledges that nurseries often have little choice, because their costs are more than the funding provided by the government (Kellow 2021). Overall, Brealey casts doubt on the efficacy of the changes to the free childcare provision, suggesting that the Conservative government continued yet purposefully underfunded the scheme for political clout, and that working mothers will ultimately continue to pay an invisible 'tax' from their additional unpaid labour as carers.

Kate, whose daughter is 18-months old and did not yet qualify for free childcare hours at the time of our interview, acknowledged, "some people might say, it's not worth me going back to work, because it [nursery] costs so much money." At the same time, she highlighted the long-term benefit of returning to work: "Women have gained so much from going to work and even though it might not make perfect financial sense now, it will be financially beneficial in the long-term." Anna echoed this, saying, "I think my salary at some stages probably just about covered nursery fees, but not much else. But it was more about allowing me to continue working rather than making money." Their reflections illustrate the squeeze created by the policy design, where individual households are forced to make costly and stressful choices, such as absorbing high childcare fees and working late into the evening, to accommodate an inflexible system. As Amelia pointed out, "It's all very well being flexible, but sometimes if I'm putting my children to bed and then I've got to do another two hours work or something, I mean, there is a level of that where you just think, I don't want to do it." Given that this was a relatively high-earning sample of men and women, the fact that participants still struggled to justify the cost of childcare underlines how much more acute these dilemmas might be for lower-income families. If professional women on stable salaries with hybrid working partners find themselves weighing up whether it is "worth" staying in work, those with lower wages and less interpersonal support may face starker choices between sustaining a career or stepping back to provide care.

The lack of childcare places

The high cost of childcare is not the only barrier to access. Even when parents can shoulder the financial burden of nurseries, as many of the professionals in this sample could, access is further constrained by the availability of suitable nursery places. Nurseries and afterschool clubs across the UK face staff shortages and limited capacity, meaning that families often compete for scarce places or find themselves on long waiting lists (Clarke 2025). As a result of the rollout of increased free childcare hours, the UK Government estimated that an additional 70,000 extra nursery places and 35,000 staff will be needed to cope with the increased demand (Clarke 2025). The early years workforce in the UK has experienced significant staffing issues, with two-thirds of providers reporting issues with both recruitment and retention in 2023 (Farquharson 2024). The central issue is the low pay: 50% of staff quitting nursery settings cited this as their reason for leaving, and research from charity Save

the Children found that some childcare staff were being paid under the National Minimum Wage, despite being eligible (Farquharson 2024; Talbot 2025). The low pay and high turnover in the sector reflect the systemic undervaluing of both paid and unpaid care work in UK policy and funding structures, where the labour of sustaining families and communities is persistently under-resourced, despite the recent policy shift towards better childcare provision. This results in what Fraser describes as a ‘care deficit’, in which families and communities are overburdened due to insufficient public support and provision (Fraser 2018).

Existing nursery provision is unevenly distributed, creating so-called ‘childcare deserts’ areas with chronically low accessibility, often in more deprived regions. Yet even in Oxfordshire, considered one of the best areas in the UK for childcare accessibility (ONS 2024), parents reported difficulties finding places for their children. Kate’s husband described their surprise at their difficulties in finding a nursery place for their daughter: “We were totally naïve. We had a child, and we thought, oh, we’ll just sign up for nursery now, thinking there’s probably be a spot in six or seven months. We had to wait a year for a nursery spot. Before that, we had to hire a dedicated nanny to look after her, because my wife was super keen to go back to the adult world of work.” Rather than rely on Kate’s unpaid labour to fill the care deficit, which would come at the detriment to her career, this couple navigated the insufficient public provision by outsourcing care to a nanny, a trade-off more accessible to middle-class families, underscoring how maternity leave and childcare policies structure women’s careers and reinforce gendered divisions of labour.

Other parents, like Neelam and her husband Nigel, resorted to sending their children to two separate nurseries due to difficulties in securing a spot at the same nursery. Having children in two different nurseries added significant logistical complexities for Neelam’s family. Morning drop-offs, staggered pick-ups, and coordination with grandparents who often picked their children up, required constant planning: “It’s quite a lot of admin management, like life management, to make sure the kids are picked up, dropped off, they’ve got their stuff, and we know where their daycare is and things like that between us.” Childcare scarcity not only delays parents’ return to work but generates the need for the additional work of searching, managing waiting lists, and piecing together provision across multiple providers. Neelam and Nigel described the availability of her parents for childcare as “very fortunate” and “lucky”, though Neelam noted that, “my parents are older now, so it’s tricky to ask them to come and help with the school run and the morning rush.” Many parents expressed similar concerns about relying on ageing parents to compensate for care, and several women reported that they were now also caring for parents with dementia. Reliance on extended family can be both limited and precarious, and navigating multiple nurseries, coordinating schedules, and managing waiting lists adds a layer to the mental load that compounds the pressures of returning to work. These pressures can be further exacerbated if, like in Neelam’s case in the previous chapter, senior colleagues without caregiving responsibilities expect and reward attendance at early morning meetings.

Mental load and sociotechnical childcare systems

Even when families secured childcare, navigating the government and school administrative and technical systems required a significant cognitive investment of coordinative labour, adding to the “admin” and “life management” of working parents. Amelia described organising tax-free childcare payments as a “fucking nightmare”. The UK Government provides up to £500 every three months for each child to help with the cost of childcare (UK Government n.d.-c). To access this provision, parents must set up an online childcare account. As Amelia explained, “You have to transfer all the money into the tax-free childcare account, then you have to go into it 24 hours later to release the money from the tax-free childcare into the accounts for the nursery or afterschool club. You have to do all of that if you want the 20% off.” Even for professionals who navigate complex technical systems as part of their employment, these systems are cumbersome, showing how technical and bureaucratic infrastructures themselves can create additional labour. “I work in finance, and I find it a headache,” Amelia said, exasperatedly.

Like many women, Amelia takes on responsibility for coordinating afterschool clubs for her son. Amelia and Amir had divided the administrative work this way since their first child had gone to nursery, which Amelia organised while she was on maternity leave and Amir was working full-time. Similarly, Abigail tells me, “I manage all of it – I manage the payment for the school, I have to arrange it through the tax-free childcare government account. And with holiday camps, I will look at what camps are on for the week that our school has half term – some schools have different weeks. Lots of people don’t realise that, so you’re hunting around for camps.” Once children were old enough to attend primary school, many parents in the sample organised afterschool clubs and holiday camps as wraparound care that enabled them to continue work without interruption at the end of the school day and during school half term and summer breaks. Organising this care over the summer break was a source of stress for many mothers, who struggled to find clubs that still had space, provided fun and enriching activities, and were relatively affordable: “Every summer, we get into a cold sweat thinking about how we will manage her [their younger daughter],” Nisha admitted.

Abigail’s husband shares the drop-off and pick-up responsibilities, but she notes that the coordinative labour falls largely on her. She also manages much of the household labour, which she outsources due to her time constraints. This outsourcing still requires organisation: “I actually pay for a cleaner and someone that does the garden as well... Basically, the only household chores left are really like clothes and washing up. And generally, I do most of that.” When asked why, Allison reflects, “I don’t know. I’m more organised than he is [...] he gets quite stressed out [...] I’ve tended to take more on when he’s had more serious depression.” Technical systems, administrative processes, and household organisation cumulatively create a substantial burden for mothers, even when fathers share visible tasks and the rest of the tasks are outsourced, stemming from the expectation that they manage household logistics and the coordination of care with work. While working from home

enables mothers to better individually manage these administrative burdens, it does not lessen their load at all. Despite describing her husband as a ‘stay-at-home dad’, one woman explained how she enjoyed working from home, because she could more easily manage, “the school related things, the medical doctor’s appointment, and things - I usually do the organising.”

Many technical systems implicitly assume a “default” parent, such as by only allowing one email address for communications and logins, or one person to manage payments. For instance, Amelia booked her son’s afterschool care while presenting on a Teams call partially because she is the only person with the log-in details. These technical affordances further entrench the gendered distribution of coordinative and administrative family work, which can often become embedded during long periods of maternity leave. These dynamics are reinforced by school practices, such as schools that call the mother first when a child is sick even when parents attempt to equally share care.

However, when technical systems enable greater collaboration, coordinative labour can be shared. Anjali, for example, explained that the afterschool club at her child’s school uses an app, which allows both parents to log in and book childcare provision. Furthermore, she highlights an important factor: “We’re lucky because the afterschool club is not usually oversubscribed, which a lot of other ones are. So, you can book it the day of.” She describes a mix and match approach: “My husband will book it if he’s going to the office. She [their daughter] needed it today, and I was going to be in the office, so it’s like whoever needs it books it. I would say it’s pretty 50/50.” Her example suggests that when there is adequate provision and it is supported by technical systems, parents may share the coordinative labour. The gendered organisation of coordinative labour is not simply a product of social norms, but is continually enacted through the technical affordances and bureaucratic requirements of childcare systems. These systems can either entrench assumptions of a “default” parent, as with single-login accounts, or enable more equitable sharing of administrative work, as in the case of apps allowing joint access.

Returning to the Office

What does the structural context mean for hybrid work?

In the UK, middle-class dual-earning professional families often must piece together patchworks of care for their young children, combining formal childcare, grandparental support where available, and the flexibility offered by hybrid working arrangements. Though many parents expressed egalitarian ideals, the wider structural context – gendered parental leave policies and limited childcare provision – continues to position mothers as primary carers. This leads to what scholars have described as a “one and a half earner work-care regime”, in which fathers’ primary role remains breadwinning, while mothers often reduce their labour market participation to part-time work to accommodate childcare (Aboim 2010; Petts et al. 2023). In my sample, hybrid work enables professional women to stretch this model. By absorbing the gaps left by inadequate childcare and uneven leave, they can maintain full-time employment and, with their partners, move closer towards dual-earner arrangements.

However, dual-earner and dual-caregiver aspirations – or what Fraser (1994) describes as the universal caregiver model – amongst hybrid workers are still met with persistent barriers. When attempting to adopt more responsibility for care, the working fathers in this study continued to face cultural, structural, and institutional barriers, from short paternity leave, stigma around taking Shared Parental Leave, and informal parent groups that restrict the flow of childcare information to women. Working mothers also faced barriers when attempting to return to paid work and to more evenly distribute coordinative labour, from loss of organisational knowledge and active discrimination from employers during maternity leave, to rigid technical systems that lock parents into uneven administrative responsibilities. I suggest that these gendered barriers emerge out of the structural context where social policy and organisational policy still implicitly assumes a gendered division of care. In this context, hybrid work offers flexibility to better meet and circumvent these constraints, but does not resolve the gendered structural context. This can explain why many women prefer flexible work, while also describing heavy and exhausting mental loads.

In a policy environment that encourages parents to manage care and work in an individualised and traditionally gendered manner, the increased prevalence of hybrid and flexible work arrangements became the only way that couples in this study could attempt to share care and work full-time. It allowed mothers and other primary caregivers, like Asher, to access full-time work despite weak structural support, and facilitated fathers to enact a parenting model that more closely resembles ‘involved fathering’ while maintaining their careers and status as breadwinners (Dermott 2014; Faircloth 2023). However, the introduction of hybrid work alone cannot address the divisions in coordinative labour and experiences of the mental load that I suggest become entrenched as early on as maternity leave and exacerbated by the uneven childcare provision. As I have shown in Chapters 4 and

5, hybrid work can amplify the sense of an exhausting, potentially guilt-ridden or shame-inducing, load experienced by women by expecting far greater amounts of coordinative labour that arises from increasingly individualised schedules and shifting expectations around physical presence and digital availability.

Overall, when both parents have access to hybrid work, they can begin to individually address the care deficit that emerges when families and communities are overburdened and public supports are inadequate or withdrawn (Fraser 2018). However, this structural context simultaneously locks families into individualised responsibilities for care that take shape within traditionally gendered configurations. Using hybrid work to manage work and care is only possible via coordinative labour – with someone actively stitching fragments of care and work together – and, as I have shown, this labour falls disproportionately to working mothers. It also seems most conducive in a dual-earner model, with parents able to mix and match their office and home working days to manage the drop offs and pick-ups that must still happen even if their child is in full-time care. How might single parents fare when following a hybrid model?

Consider the myriad examples throughout the chapters: Kate and her husband’s struggle to find a nursery so that she could return to her career, Neelam coordinating school pick-ups with her elderly parents, and Asher discreetly leaving his desk at home to pick his children up at school. I suggest that without broader structural and institutional change, hybrid work is simply a temporary and limited buffer to the pressures of managing work and care, and will continue to lock men and women into uneven cognitive loads. In the next section, I explore how the patchworks of care stitched together by hybrid workers are coming under threat from the rising popularity of return to office mandates.

Return to office mandates in the UK

Return to Office (RTO) mandates are organisational policies that require employees to return to the office and work on-site, representing the attempt made by business leaders to reverse the trend towards remote, home-based, and hybrid work that began during the pandemic. They have been highly publicized and have given rise to heated debates and conflicts between employees and companies, with employers blaming home-working employees for poor productivity and employees disputing the rationale for mandated office days (Prakash 2023). The emergence of RTOs and the attempt to reestablish pre-pandemic work arrangements threatens to reveal how fragile parents’ individualised patchworks of care are to organisational change. Without organisational support, the gaps and inadequacies in childcare provision for working parents who wish to manage work and care within an egalitarian model are laid bare. These inadequacies are further magnified if they also lack access to support from extended family or their partner. Because of the traditionally gendered structural context, I suggest that a reversal of flexible working arrangements will reverse the small gains made towards women’s participation in the labour market and men’s participation in

routine caregiving (Chung and Van Der Horst 2018; Lyttelton et al. 2022). The reversal of flexible working policies is itself gendered, signalling what kinds of workers and forms of commitment those in positions of power within organisations value, and symbolising a re-prioritisation of ideal worker cultures.

Though there are earlier examples, RTO mandates became increasingly common in 2023 and 2024, which aligned with my period of data collection. In interviews, participants expressed anxiety that their companies might soon announce an RTO, while several others were already dealing with the logistical and emotional implications of mandates that had been introduced, such as managing long commutes and intensified time-based role conflict. At the time of our interview, Linda was three weeks into a new role at an AI start-up. “I specifically chose a role that was remote, because I do not want to be trekking into London – I can’t do it anymore,” she told me. “So in this role, I’m on a remote contract, but in the contract, it says I must be in the office ‘as required’.” Unspecific wording in employment contracts was common amongst interviewees, leaving them vulnerable to changing management strategies. Despite her remote contract, Linda sensed that her employer’s stance on in-person work might be shifting, “I’m starting to feel, already, there might be a pressure to go in.” Several months after our interview, I noticed that her LinkedIn profile had been updated to reflect that she had left the company. Via email, she told me that she had resigned after she had been asked to make the two-hour commute to the London office three times per week, which had negatively impacted her family life. At the time, Linda was still unemployed.

Improved productivity and collaboration are the key justifications used by employers when communicating RTO mandates to their teams. In 2025, Amazon’s CEO Andy Jassy announced the requirement that all employees be in the office five days a week, stating: “We’ve observed that it’s easier for our teammates to learn, model, practice, and strengthen our culture; collaborating, brainstorming, and inventing are simpler and more effective; teaching and learning from one another are more seamless; and, teams tend to be better connected to one another” (Jassy 2024). Gary told me that his employer had announced an RTO mandate because: “they feel we’ve lost the human touch and the ability to collaborate and learn things from people [...] so they’ve asked us to come in on a Tuesday and Thursday.” Yet Rashid shared a more cynical take on the collaboration narrative: “They have overromanticized this idea that when managers met their direct reports in person, they were able to solve problems in 15 minutes that might have taken three, four, or five days to solve via email. I don’t buy that. It’s just corporate messaging that’s cascading down.” Several interviewees suggested that RTO mandates were, instead, a surreptitious way to conduct a “backdoor restructure”. “I’m 99% certain some companies say, we need to reduce our workforce – what’s a way to do it without the bad publicity of formal redundancies? Well, why don’t we have a harsh return to office policy, and half the people will want to leave anyway,” Gary explained.

As Ding and Ma (2024) find in their analysis of US firm RTO mandates, managers impose RTOs because they believe it will increase firm value. Yet beyond these financial motivations, Ding and Ma also posit that managers use RTOs to reassert control over employees and blame home-workers as scapegoats for bad firm performance, causing a significant decline in employee job satisfaction but no major improvements in financial performance or firm value. Building on this, I suggest that at the ideological core of the ongoing RTO debate is a normative tussle between a masculinised, gendered ideal worker culture that positions presenteeism as the marker of success, and nascent hybrid working cultures that accept greater spatio-temporal autonomy, individualisation, and the integration of non-work responsibilities into working identities. In these debates, in-person collaboration and “water cooler chat” becomes a proxy for the ideal worker who demonstrates their efficacy via continuous presence to the employer. For example, in 2022 Elon Musk announced that “everyone at Tesla is required to spend a minimum of 40 hours in the office per week”, later publishing a Tweet that stated that those unwilling to abide by the new rules can “pretend to work somewhere else” (BBC 2022). In the UK, Lord Alan Sugar, businessman and TV personality, branded flexible and homeworkers “lazy gits” (Nanji 2022), and ex-Asda chairman Lord Rose attributed the UK economy’s “general decline” to homeworking, suggesting that working from home creates a generation not doing “proper work” (Conway 2025). Ironically, what the data from my research participants suggests is that hybrid workers *are* continuously available to their employers, albeit in a digitalised sense.

The probability of RTO mandates is significantly higher for firms with “male and powerful CEOs”, who are more likely to want to grab power back from their increasingly autonomous and unsupervised employees (Ding and Ma 2024). Linda describes these powerful male CEOs as “the big dogs” who rescind inclusive workplace policies when market conditions worsen: “They’re having to drive business results fast, because things are going wrong rather than being on a trajectory of, you know, 40, 50, or 80% growth [...] it becomes like a big dog culture – I’m telling you, do as you’re told culture, rather than everyone’s opinion matters. [...] They’re just bastards when the pressure’s on – it’s not about the people, it’s about the numbers. So all this DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] and fluffy stuff is not real when it comes to the crunch.” The rising prevalence of RTO mandates in 2023 and 2024 coincided with looming global economic instability and mass layoffs, with tech companies cutting more than 150,000 workers in 2022, and finance industry giants Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, and Citigroup slashing thousands of positions (Cox 2023). With employee retention no longer a top priority, “big dog” employers have greater leverage in requiring in-person work. Chris, a father of two working in an Advertising Technology company, noted: “The power was with employees during COVID, which meant people could push all sorts of things. Post-COVID, with all the redundancies, there aren’t that many jobs around, and suddenly companies are starting to go, actually, we want you to come in five days a week. If you don’t like it? You need to leave.”

When economic growth stalls, “powerful male CEOs” (Ding and Ma 2024) can more easily sideline previous commitments to inclusive working models and reinstate traditionally gendered models of work. As pointed out by software engineer Nora, “it’s mainly men, middle management type, the ones who have had a particular working culture, who miss it the most and are advocating for it, whereas for the rest of us, we feel like we finally found a balance.” However, a CEO’s gender cannot be causally linked to their tendency to issue an RTO mandate – there are several examples of female CEOs also demanding full returns, such as United Parcel Service (UPS) CEO Carol Tome who announced both a mass redundancy and a new requirement for those still employed to work in-person five days a week in 2024 (Doherty 2024). In her study of five large, multinational companies, Wajcman finds that both men and women were expected to adopt a masculine management style – directive, self-interested, decisive, aggressive, and task-oriented – in order to survive and succeed in their jobs, and in harsh economic conditions, management often toughened their management style (Wajcman 1998). She also found that women in management were much more likely to be childless than men in management, who were more likely to be partnered with full-time housewives. In other words, women in management were required to become symbolic men – the ideal worker with no outside obligations. What matters is not the gender of individual leaders, but the gendered organisational system that rewards masculinised management styles, prioritising in-person visibility, task-oriented performance, and detachment from caregiving responsibilities.

Impact on caregivers

In mandating in-person presence, RTOs threaten the fragile and individualised balance of care and work that hybrid working parents have cultivated. In hybrid models, the increased autonomy around the location and time of work frees up parents to manage more rigid childcare schedules around their working hours. When both parents follow a hybrid model, their mix and match arrangements can enable both parents to engage in full-time employment and participate in routine care, despite and due to imbalances in coordinative labour. The direct cost to employees of RTO mandates, borne entirely by them, is the amount of time spent commuting, which has a direct impact on their work-life balance (Ding et al. 2024), which increases the irreconcilability of childcare and work.

Women’s structural position of disadvantage in the labour market, starting from motherhood, leaves their labour market participation disproportionately vulnerable to the return to office. As noted by Chung and Yuan (2025), RTO mandates risk creating a two-tiered market with women and parents remaining remote, undermining gender diversity, talent retention, and workforce wellbeing. Women may be more likely to step back partially or entirely from the labour market in order to balance work and family commitments, with men remaining in the primary breadwinner role. Ding et al. (2024) find that in the US, firms who issue RTO mandates experience abnormally high turnover, which is especially pronounced for female employees, senior employees, and more skilled employees. They posit that RTO mandates

make it more difficult for parents to reconcile their family responsibilities with their work responsibilities.

During our interview, Asher revealed that his employer had recently announced an RTO policy. “They want three days a week in the office, which is a big adjustment, especially because it means I’ll have to waste time going in, I’ll be on Zoom calls, and I’ll have to leave really early to pick the kids up. [...] Personally, my concern is that one of the unintended consequences is that they will roll back the diversity and inclusion work they’ve worked so hard on, impacting people like me who have caring responsibilities.” Similarly, Edward explained that if his employer were to require in-person attendance, “it would be pretty difficult to manage. At the age of our children now, they can’t go home from school alone. There’s no flexibility in the system, so it would be challenging to manage a Monday to Friday in the office.” Ding and Ma (2024) highlight the negative impact of RTO mandates on employee job satisfaction, with many employees feeling like their efforts at work are not being understood. Asher shared his own confusion about the rationale for the RTO: “I’ve been doing my work, getting good feedback from colleagues, delivering things on time, so in terms of what the business needs, I’ve definitely been doing that [from home].” Several months later, I caught up with Asher. Like Linda, he was no longer working for the same employer. Unlike Linda, Asher told me he had been made redundant soon after the RTO mandate.

Yet despite the high-profile nature of RTO mandates, the speedy rate at which they appeared to sweep through organisations in 2023 and 2024, and the tightening of the labour market, there is evidence that employees have resisted the attempt by management to reassert control. Resistance can be overt: workers organised walkouts, strikes, and petitions at Amazon, though these early forms of resistance do not appear to have impacted Jassy’s 2024 announcement (Zahn 2023). Chung and Yuan (2025) find that only 42% of workers say they would comply with an RTO mandate, with 9% saying they would quit immediately, and 49% saying they would look for a job with more flexibility. Amongst these numbers, women are the least likely to comply with RTO mandates. Amongst my participants, resistance was micro. Kim said, “I think people will ask for forgiveness, rather than permission – I don’t think they’ll always come in for the three days - as long as people are there when they need to see clients.” Similarly, Gary noticed: “People came in a lot for the first few weeks, but numbers have already tailed off.” On the other hand, some reported anecdotally that caregivers had opted out of their employment when given an RTO mandate. Abigail explained that “people were not very happy at all” after her organisation began requiring greater in-person attendance: “One person has left already, because the travel was too much. She set herself up as an independent consultant, which can fit with drop offs and pick-ups.”

Furthermore, not all firms are in support of RTO mandates, and several large companies have openly resisted the trend. For example, Spotify introduced a ‘work-from-anywhere’ model in 2021. Reflecting on the sector’s shift back towards office mandates, Spotify’s Chief Human

Resources Officer, Katarina Berg, remarked in *Raconteur*: “You can’t spend a lot of time hiring grown-ups and then treat them like children” (Forsdick 2024). Similarly, cloud storage platform Dropbox adopted a remote-first approach, with CEO Drew Houston telling *The Verge*: “It worked a lot better than we thought. People loved not commuting and the flexibility to live anywhere. Now we allow people to self-organise” (Patel 2024). Beyond these corporate stances, work-from-home rates in the UK remain stable despite media claims of decline: 25% of the workforce continues to work from home at least three days a week, while 40% do so at least one day a week (Chung and Yuan 2025). Moreover, Chung and Yuan (2025) identify a gradual increase in the average number of permitted home-working days. Based on insights from my own data, even those required in the office as part of their hybrid arrangement take a more flexible approach that enables them to leave early or only attend the office for certain meetings. Taken together, these figures and narratives highlight a countertrend that resists the re-imposition of ideal worker norms designed to reassert managerial control. Instead, they point towards a model of work that values autonomy, flexibility, and self-organisation.

For many employees, the ability to work flexibly is not only about convenience or reducing a care “burden”, but about reshaping intimacy, quality time, and connection in everyday family life. Hybrid and flexible work configurations enable the parents in this study to carve out more meaningful time with children and to be more present in family routines. As Mary summed up, “I often read that working mums are burdened by childcare, and I don’t think we talk enough about the fact that people actually want to spend time with their children.” For this reason, many parents described working from home as a “privilege”. In her diary, Shruti writes: “Working from home feels great, like a privilege, because I get to spend that much more time with my family, with my kids.” Neelam says that being able to complete housework during the day “gives you more time with the family” in the evening, allowing her to spend her evenings playing with her children rather than completing domestic work, and Allison tells me that her flexible work allows her to “go to a school concert, I can take my son to the doctor, it’s just completely accepted.” Fathers echoed these sentiments - Amir said, “I just love that I can work around my life. I can work and see my kids every morning,” and David said, “being around for the kids is really great.” Similarly, Edward said, “If you’ve got children, you want to see them and spend time with them.” These accounts add further nuance to the familiar, important, but one-dimensional framing of flexible work as a tool to enable women to remain in full-time employment. Instead, the parents in this study also framed flexibility as enabling a connected, intimate, and meaningful mode of family life.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I combined insights from interviews with an analysis of the social and organisational policy landscape in the UK, plus contemporary media discourse on RTO mandates, to explore how the structural context continues to shape gendered divisions of work and care. Ultimately, I argue that the social policy context in the UK funnels parents with egalitarian ideals into more traditional divisions of paid work and unpaid care. In this context, parents have used the increased flexibility of hybrid working arrangements since the pandemic to reconcile these unequal divisions and to enact a dual-earner, dual-caregiver household, where women can engage in full-time work and men can participate in the routine care of their children, such as school pick-ups. With greater flexibility in their working hours, parents can coordinate patchworks of care and cultivate more quality time with their families.

These patchworks represent a highly individualised strategy for managing work and care that requires sustained coordinative labour from women and other primary carers, who are predominantly responsible for the coordination of atomised schedules and unfixed spatialities via digital technologies. I posit that without addressing the gendered impacts of social policy on parents in the UK, they remain vulnerable to shifts in organisational policy - such as the rise of RTO mandates – that may lead to women and primary caregivers reducing their working hours to manage care schedules. RTO mandates are about more than returning to previous modes of working, but about reinstating previous gendered values about which kinds of workers are most valued: the masculinized ideal worker.

However, the trend towards flexible working models has not been completely reversed. Despite highly publicized RTO mandates, there are signs that flexible approaches are becoming increasingly embedded in the working culture of the UK, with more than a quarter of workers in the UK adopting a hybrid model (Office for National Statistics 2024). Rather than creating gender equality purely by allowing women to fit into the ‘male model’ of participation in the labour market, greater flexibility in working hours allows working parents to reshape their approach to family life, increasing their sense of intimacy, connection, and quality time with their children. In this sense, hybrid work could represent one step towards creating a more care-oriented society.

What this chapter highlights is that context matters, and that working arrangements alone cannot dislodge gendered divisions that arise from gendered social policy. Without structural reform to parental leave, childcare provision, and organisational expectations, the burden of coordinating work and care will continue to fall on households rather than institutions, reproducing gender inequality through invisible labour rather than overt exclusion. In the following, final chapter, I conclude by laying out recommendations at the macro and meso levels that, based on the evidence collected, may contribute to levelling the gendered responsibilities for coordinating family and home life with professional careers amongst dual-earning couples.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This closing chapter summarizes my argument, restates my key theoretical contribution: coordinative labour, and makes practical recommendations on the policy and organisational level. I also highlight the limitations of this research and propose directions for future study.

Overall Argument: How Hybrid Work Reconfigures the Gendered Organisation of Work and Care

The normalisation of hybrid work has begun to reconfigure the gendered organisation of the work-family axis (Williams 2001), creating new possibilities for the arrangement of work and care within the middle-class, dual earning households in this study. Earlier research characterised the relationship between paid work and family life as a site of temporal and moral conflict between the ideal, unencumbered worker and the devoted caregiver (Acker 1990, Williams 2001), leading to a time bind of competing devotions (Hochschild and Machung 2012, Blair-Loy 2003) that left women at a disadvantage in the labour market. This thesis finds that hybrid work can facilitate the parents in this study to feel that they can spend more quality time with children at important moments during the day, to share routine and day-to-day care and housework, and maintain full-time careers.

Increased control over the timing and location of work allows couples reinvest time once spent in the office or commuting into time and presence with their children, and for women to create pockets of uninterrupted leisure time. Fathers are increasingly able to enact involved forms of parenting that involves taking part in visible, day-to-day family work, from school pick-ups to swimming lessons to everyday domestic routines like cooking and cleaning. In supportive workplace cultures, hybrid working parents can decide to visibly share their caregiving identities with their colleagues, whether via transparent calendar practices, by including their children on internal work calls taken from home, or by communicating that they are logging off for bathtime or swimming lessons with children. An exploration of the gendered experience of hybrid working therefore reveals an evolving configuration of the work-family axis, one in which the capacity to participate in both paid work and caregiving has expanded for both men and women, potentially bringing the parents in this study closer to Fraser's (1994) 'universal caregiver' model, which is premised on the establishment of a new standard that treats 'women's current life patterns as the norm'. This model assumes that all people, including both men and women, have care responsibilities and are expected to share paid work and caregiving equally. Many, if not all, participants in the study valued hybrid working arrangements for enabling them to enact more family- and care-oriented modes of life.

Yet while the normalisation of digitalised, flexible work enables these evolutions, it also gives rise to complex dynamics that are experienced by women as stress, overwhelm, and constant responsibility. The deinstitutionalisation of working time and location requires

greater amounts of coordinative labour to synchronise increasingly asynchronous working patterns within the family using digital and analogue technologies, such as calendars, messages, and weekly planning meetings. The responsibility for this coordination is predominantly shouldered by hybrid working mothers, other than one notable example. The continued stigmatisation of caregiving identities in some ideal worker (Williams 2001) workplace cultures means that even though parents are better able to logistically manage the care of children, they must also conceal this management from their employer; grappling with their shame, guilt, and concealment adds to the experience of a load. Hybrid work creates the conditions and expectation for digitalised simultaneity – where paid work and unpaid care work layer and leak via the digital devices that provide the infrastructure of work and care – producing a fragmented and overloaded experience of time.

Hybrid work has normalised and intensified pre-existing shifts in how work and care intersect over time, giving new permanence to what has been described as blurred or leaky boundaries or ‘fuzzy frontiers’ (Cox et al. 2014; Kossek, Perrigino, and Lautsch 2022b; Valenzuela-Garcia 2020). Amongst these workers, leaky boundaries are accepted by parents who expect, and at times embrace, a “trade-off” where work and care time and tasks merge and become fragmented and continuous: work extends into the evening; childcare happens during the day; school booking occurs at 1pm; parents keep their work phone on during dinner and take work calls during the school run. While flexible arrangements open new possibilities for shared participation, they also embed novel forms of strain and role conflict that redefine what equality means in practice. While both parents may visibly split work and care, mothers experience this strain more acutely due to their continued association as manager of the home.

As I have highlighted throughout this thesis, the sense of overload experienced more acutely by women stems from the enduring norms that associate moral, intensive motherhood with the management of childcare and the domestic. Despite men’s increasing participation in routine care and domestic work, women remain positioned – whether it is by themselves, their partners, their employers, the policy environment, or a combination of all these factors – as primarily responsible for the ongoing coordination and emotional maintenance of family life. Even in egalitarian couples who aspire to share care and housework as they engage in professional careers, the cultural expectation that women will assume responsibility for the smooth functioning of the household persists. The one example of a father, Asher, who identified as the primary carer and as being predominantly responsible for the coordinative labour of the home suggests that the responsibility for this labour is shaped as much by caregiving roles as by gender, even as those roles remain deeply gendered. Yet despite this inversion of normative arrangements, his wife continued to be enrolled into coordinative labour by external structures. For example, Mums’ WhatsApp groups, which excluded Asher’s participation, illustrate how institutional and cultural infrastructures continue to presume maternal responsibility, reinscribing women’s involvement in the organisation of family life even when they are not the primary carers.

This gendered cognitive stickiness (Weeks et al. 2025) is rearticulated through the digital infrastructures of hybrid work. The labour of aligning the schedules and locations of multiple family members, anticipating needs, and managing emotion, often via the same digital infrastructures used to mediate hybrid work, continues to fall disproportionately to women. In this context, the enactment of ‘good motherhood’ is tied to attentiveness, presence, and coordination, while ‘good fatherhood’ is often enacted through visible acts of care. What is striking in participants’ accounts is not simply that work leaks into home and home leaks into work, but that multiple domains of life now occur simultaneously. Work emails, school communications, childcare platforms, shopping apps, and reminders all arrive through the same devices, often during the working day. These activities were previously temporally and spatially bounded – for instance, school contact via paper forms collected by children, care coordination via face-to-face interaction. Digitalisation allows parents to be at work, home, and the school at the same time. This collapse of boundaries across domains creates the conditions under which coordination becomes denser and more continuous, and hybrid working mothers experience strain-based forms of role conflict.

Hybrid work thus provides new tools and rhythms for organising family life, but cannot alone dismantle the gendered hierarchies of responsibility that underpin it. If hybrid work is adopted without a concurrent collaborative approach to childcare and housework within the couple or a supportive working context, it risks amplifying the experience of the mental load experienced by women at the same time as it creates the conditions for their continued full-time employment. While digital tools such as shared calendars technically afford coordination, their effectiveness depends on whether coordination is recognised as a shared responsibility. As we saw with Elizabeth and Edward, if one partner does not engage with these tools, their collaborative affordances remain unrealised. Whereas Gary used his digital calendar to conceal his caregiving responsibilities during the working day, Anjali used hers to communicate them. In this sense, technologies make certain forms of coordination possible, but norms determine whether those possibilities are taken up.

Through this thesis’s comparative examination of the gendered experience of hybrid work, I open a window into the structural mechanisms that shape and constrain the choices made by parents. While flexible work was valued by the participants of this study for enabling them to better manage the competing temporal demands of their professional and family responsibilities, it is also an essential means for individual families to compensate for the gaps left by inadequate and expensive childcare provision and gendered parental leave policies. In this way, flexibility operates as a buffer that enables these middle-class families to privately absorb the consequences of weak policy and institutional support, particularly when some organisational cultures continue to “tar women with the working mum brush”. In this chapter, I therefore outline a series of recommendations that may help to begin dislodging this stickiness. These recommendations operate across two levels: the structural

and the organisational. Recommendations must act in tandem if hybrid work is to realise its potential to foster a more equitable work-family axis.

Theoretical Contribution: Coordinative Labour

Flexibility requires effort in its organisation. Among the couples who participated in this study, this effort is very often gendered in nature. To describe the efforts made by women to make flexibility ‘work’, I introduce the concept of coordinative labour. Coordinative labour is the gendered, sociomaterial work to align and manage the temporal and spatial dimensions of work and care. This work involves emotional as well as cognitive labour, as coordinating how work and care schedules intersect involves a consideration of the emotional impact of these arrangements on children. The concept developed inductively from interviews and diary entries where participants described the ongoing planning and organisational work of everyday life. I propose that coordinative labour is a key mechanism in contemporary flexible work cultures that can explain how flexibility is sustained, why hybrid work can reproduce inequality, and where new possibilities for egalitarian reform might emerge.

Expanded definition

The first definition of coordinative labour can be found in Chapter 2, Literature Review. In Chapter 4, I elaborated on the concept via empirical data to describe the sociomaterial practices through which hybrid families manage work and childcare responsibilities, such as managing fragmented and individualised working schedules and locations, and managing the emotional demands that arise when care and work roles and responsibilities overlap. In Chapter 5, I explored how an organisation’s gender culture can exacerbate the intensity of coordinative labour and highlighted how the demanding work of coordination may lead women to choose between maintaining professional visibility or maintaining an orientation to care when children are young. In Chapter 6, I examined how the UK’s social and policy landscape reproduces gendered divisions of labour and responsibility, including coordinative labour, showing that the UK’s gendered parental leave and inadequate childcare provision pushes families to rely on individualised strategies of coordination to stitch together patchworks of care that depend heavily on women’s time, planning, and digital management.

Coordinative labour encompasses the effort required to synchronise work and family schedules and locations in a context of digitalised flexible work. Moments of coordination are often accompanied by negative emotions such as guilt, shame, stress, and overwhelm, that arise out of the strain to meet the normative expectations of one’s role as a worker and a parent, particularly when both roles vie for the individual’s attention. It requires emotional labour to smooth or conceal conflict, guilt, and shame when these schedules clash, and to consider how configurations of work and care might impact care recipients. This labour is carried out through digital infrastructures that enable coordination to occur continuously and across domains of work and care. Examples have been woven through each chapter of the

thesis, such as: Edward and Elizabeth's weekly meetings, Amelia's simultaneous work and after-school club booking, Gary and Anjali's digital work calendar practices, Asher and Mary's management of 'shame', Diana's open-door strategy, and Anjali's afterschool booking app.

Though coordinative labour is predominantly shouldered by women, I have highlighted instances where couples adopt a more collaborative approach. Couples may use the affordances of digital apps and technologies to more evenly contribute to aligning schedules, such as Shruti and her partner's approach to calendar keeping, or Anjali and her partner's joint approach to booking afterschool care. Flexible and home-based working schedules create opportunities for couples to spend time during the working day to plan, such as in Lucas and Lydia's ad hoc meal planning, and can allow women to claim uninterrupted leisure time – 'me-time'.

However, I suggest that though these dynamics may represent more egalitarian attempts to share the work of organisation that underpins flexibility, women often remain more emotionally and morally enrolled in the work of coordination. They continue to feel primarily responsible for maintaining the emotional equilibrium of the household, for instance by worrying about whether their child is getting 'enough' time with their father, feeling guilty when they themselves are not present enough with their child when working from home, and managing the work of kinkeeping that sustains connection and care with the extended family. Ultimately, I suggest that this moral and emotional responsibility anchors coordinative labour in the gendered culture and identity-making of intensive motherhood (Hays 1996), and means that even shared systems of planning may be experienced in diverging ways by men and women. As noted by Offer (2014), the experience of negative emotion – particularly social emotions such as guilt, shame, and worry about another – may be evidence for the enduring association of motherhood with ultimate moral responsibility for the household.

Across the thesis, coordinative labour operates through a set of interlinked processes that help explain why hybrid work reconfigures, but does not resolve, gendered inequalities. Digitalisation collapses boundaries across life domains, such as work, care, school, and nurseries, creating the conditions under which coordination becomes continuous rather than episodic, layered rather than segmented. This boundary collapse produces temporal density and role conflict, as multiple responsibilities can and must be managed simultaneously, rather than sequentially. This enables primary carers to participate in the labour market but also contributes to their experience of the mental load. And while digital tools afford collaborative possibilities for coordination, their uptake is mediated by gendered norms. Technologies can only redistribute labour when coordination itself is treated as a shared responsibility. Coordinative labour remains anchored in gendered expectations of care, meaning that even shared systems of planning may be experienced asymmetrically. Together, these processes clarify how hybrid work generates and depends on coordination, how that coordination is

constituted in part via its digital organisation, and how it continues to privilege those less burdened by the responsibility for aligning work and care.

How it builds on the literature

Coordinative labour synthesizes and is inspired by work cited throughout this thesis from Daminger (2019), Hochschild (1979), Dean et al (2022), and Weeks and Ruppner (2025), who all explore the cognitive and emotional dimensions of domestic labour. Specifically, the concept of coordinative labour bridges and builds on several prominent concepts in the sociological literature, such as Daminger's (2019) cognitive labour, Hochschild's (1979) emotional labour, Dean et al's (2022) understanding of the mental load as an outcome of emotional plus cognitive labour, plus Wajcman's (2015) work on temporal density and the time-pressure paradox. I propose that my conceptualisation of coordinative labour adds to the literature in three ways: by introducing a sociomaterial focus on the temporal and spatial organisation of work and care under digitally mediated conditions, by understanding cognitive and emotional labour as symbiotic, and in enabling a holistic analysis of how household dynamics and organisational culture interact.

Firstly, my analysis of coordinative labour connects cognitive and emotional labour with sociomaterial systems. Most literature on the mental load has focused on the internal or intangible processes of thinking, planning, and emotional management within households, yet it has tended to overlook how these practices and processes are constituted via their material environments. One of the most powerful arguments that Daminger (2019) makes is that cognitive labour is difficult to measure or understand *because* it is held 'inside women's heads'. Similarly, Dean et al (2022) highlight the invisibility of the mental load. Yet unlike classic forms of cognitive or emotional labour (Damingher 2019; Hochschild 1979), I suggest that coordinative labour is not contained within the mind alone. It is an infrastructural practice that is distributed across people, artefacts, and technologies, which play a key role in intensifying the experience of time as "dense", constituting the leaky boundaries between work and home, and towards a felt sense of the mental load.

In adopting a sociomaterial lens inspired by Orlikowski (2007), I therefore extend existing analyses of invisible labour to show how hybrid-working families perform coordination across multiple digital platforms, such as calendars, childcare apps, Teams, and WhatsApp, simultaneously. This distributed coordination makes visible how technologies actively participate in the gendered organisation and experience of both work and family life. In this light, a study of hybrid work is not about the impact of any one technology but about how shifting expectations of where, when, and how digitalised work occurs map onto gendered norms of care. The ability to manage work and childcare in parallel through digital tools, for example, by having a Teams call and a school booking platform open on two screens, produces the very conditions that intensify these dual demands in the same moment. Coordinative labour therefore offers an analytic lens for understanding how temporal, spatial,

technological, mental, and emotional processes intersect to reproduce and reconfigure gendered patterns and experiences of hybrid working.

Secondly, I argue that in the context of coordinative labour, cognitive and emotional labour are inextricably entangled - a relationship that helps explain why cognitive labour remains, as Weeks et al. (2025) describe, normatively 'sticky'." Like Daminger (2019), I maintain that these are analytically distinct forms of labour, but following Dean et al's (2022) definition of the mental load, I also argue that in the context of coordinative labour they are inseparable. For the mothers in this study, emotional attunement is built into the efforts required to coordinate daily life. Coordination thus becomes a means of caring: booking an afterschool club that a child will enjoy, arranging time with a partner or father, devising individualised strategies for coordinating care with work that minimize the potential emotional impact on children, or ensuring that dinner is not only what is found at the back of the cupboards, but something that is both healthy and will be enjoyed.

While fathers in this study increasingly practiced what could be called an "emotionally attuned" involved fatherhood, their attunement was often expressed through presence, which they made sense of as being more available to their children than their own fathers had been. For mothers, emotional attunement was not only about being present with their children, but about holding the child's needs continually in mind. In this sense, caring through coordination represents an extension and reconfiguration of Hays's (1996) intensive mothering norm, in which good mothers must always remain mentally and emotionally oriented toward their children. This moral and emotional responsibility is further reinforced by gendered leave policies that continue to position mothers as the primary parent. As Weeks and Ruppner (2024) argue, domestic cognitive labour may be one of the primary ways couples who appear egalitarian in other respects continue to "do gender", and the emotional component of coordinative labour offers an important normative explanation for why this persists. The continued association of motherhood with emotional attunement and logistics generates significant strain-based role conflict that appears to more acutely impact hybrid working women, who may experience holding these roles simultaneously as a struggle.

Finally, by applying the concept of coordinative labour beyond domestic processes to the ways women and men experience hybrid working arrangements, I extend its analytic reach into the gendered organisation of paid work. This application reveals how the gendered organisational cultures that shape the implementation of hybrid working models can both enable and constrain women's participation in the workforce in new ways. In some organisations, hybrid work makes it possible for women and other primary caregivers to perform as if they were "ideal workers" by both coordinating care and employment through complex and individualised temporal, spatial, and technological arrangements and by concealing this labour from employers who may hold stigmatizing views. Coordinative labour can therefore both mask and enable the caregiving work that underpins such performances, allowing flexibility to appear seamless while obscuring the intensified

responsibilities borne by women. Their sense of carrying an unmanageable load, coupled with the trade-off between presence in the office and presence with children, may contribute to decisions to pursue or not pursue career progression.

An analysis of coordinative labour reveals the limits of more inclusive workplaces, which in turn highlights the gaps in the broader policy environment. Even in supportive work-family cultures that frame hybrid work as inclusive and destigmatised, the uneven domestic infrastructures of coordination that determine who manages schedules, locations and mobility, and emotion via technology at home mean that women often remain constrained by their caregiving responsibilities. In many cases, women's coordinative efforts extended to managing their partners' access to and enactment of professional flexibility. Mary, for example, encouraged her husband to request more flexibility at work so that he could take on additional childcare, enabling her to go into the office. Yet while this appeared to redistribute care, Mary still carried the responsibility for orchestrating that arrangement.

The disproportionate coordinative burden of "life admin" shouldered by women, such as liaising with grandparents to manage the school run in order to attend important morning meetings in person, can lead some to work primarily from home and miss out on informal opportunities for career advancement. In this sense, coordinative labour reveals that the very practices which make hybrid work possible also reproduce gendered divisions of responsibility and reward those less encumbered by the work of coordination. Taken together, these arguments position coordinative labour as a framework for understanding how hybrid work reconfigures, but does not resolve, gendered inequalities in the organisation of work and care. Hybrid work does not only blur boundaries or intensify mental load, but reorganises gender inequality through coordinative labour – the ongoing, infrastructurally mediated work of aligning time and space across domains of life.

Practical Recommendations

Throughout this thesis I have grappled with what Wong (2023) describes as 'structural lag': why do couples who espouse and, in certain ways, enact gender egalitarianism continue to unequally share the labour of coordination, resulting in an intensified experience of the mental load for hybrid working women? I have analysed this paradox from the micro, meso, and macro level and, inspired by this multi-layered approach, I offer recommendations that may address the gap between structure and individual desire by removing some of the barriers to a more equitable distribution of coordinative labour. Inspired by Fraser's (1994) concept of the universal caregiver, which appears to more closely resemble what the individuals in this study desire, I argue that rather than simply incentivising women to work more, policy changes should incentivise men to participate in caregiving and domestic labour. Otherwise, changes risk intensifying the experience of a 'second shift' (Hochschild and Machung 2012), with women working in full-time, hybrid roles and managing the family coordination required to sustain this.

Parents rely on hybrid work as an individualised solution to the gaps created by structural and organisational inadequacies. Hybrid arrangements enable them to piece together complex care arrangements while concealing their labour and identities as caregivers. To avoid reinforcing this individualisation, which has so far ultimately resulted in a disproportionate coordinative burden on women, my recommendations focus on organisational and social policy rather than individual behaviour. These recommendations, grounded in my research findings, are preliminary and still warrant further exploration and testing. They are organised under two thematic categories: collaboration and inclusivity.

Collaboration

These recommendations focus on designing social policy, including technology design and adoption, to promote collaborative approaches to care, rather than defaulting to the mother as the primary parent.

1. Offer well compensated, non-transferable paternal leave.

Evidence from Nordic countries such as Sweden and Iceland demonstrates that non-transferable ‘use it or lose it’ paternal leave policies significantly increase fathers’ participation in caregiving. In contrast, the UK’s Shared Parental Leave has seen low uptake among men. Yet the adoption of paternal leave by men can have a direct impact on the motherhood penalty. For instance, research from Sweden that analyses register data has found that for every additional month of paternity leave taken by fathers, mothers’ later earnings increase by 6.7% (Johansson 2010). Furthermore, studies have consistently found that paternity-leave taking is positively associated with fathers’ time spent on housework tasks. For example, Petts, Carlson, and Knoester (2025) found that in the US, longer paternity leaves were associated with fathers performing greater shares of housework which indicates that the benefits of paternity leave include promoting paternal involvement in domestic labour as well as maternal participation in the labour market. As outlined in Chapter 6, *The Hybrid Society*, this leave must be adequately paid, for both material and normative reasons, as men’s ongoing role as primary earner of the household may mean that to lose a portion of this income during the early years of an infant’s life may disincentivise families from using this period of leave. Such policies can enable couples to establish shared routine and caregiving competencies from a child’s birth, promoting equality in planning, management, and coordination.

2. Improve the access to affordable childcare.

Affordable, high-quality childcare is foundational to equitable participation in paid work (Hochlaf and Franklin 2021), and improving access to it may reduce women’s experience of the mental load. Despite recent policy changes that extend free childcare hours to children from the age of nine months, the UK’s childcare provision remains expensive and

incomplete. Parents in this study described assembling patchworks of care through hybrid work, multiple childcare providers, and extended family networks. This complex coordination was overwhelmingly shouldered by women and primary caregivers. To reduce the coordinative labour required to access sufficient childcare, the free childcare scheme must be properly funded to ensure that nurseries can offer full provision without requiring ‘top-up’ fees, and recruit and retain sufficient staff. In her comparative study, Collins (2019) finds that strong state childcare provision aligns with higher maternal labour-force participation and more equitable divisions of care, while weak policy such as in the US individualises responsibility for care, which is often shouldered by mothers.

3. Encourage the adoption of collaborative digital infrastructures for childcare management

Digital systems that support childcare and school coordination frequently assume a single primary user. While gender norms and social structure may mean that this user tends to be the mother (e.g. the mother, presumed to be primary parent, who has a longer maternity leave so becomes the main contact for nurseries), technical systems could be designed to enable rather than limit collaborative approaches to coordinating childcare. For instance, participants described systems (e.g. afterschool booking portals or childcare tax credit accounts) that permitted only one email contact, which was typically the mother’s. This may present an unnecessary barrier for couples who may otherwise prefer to share the responsibility for using these systems, particularly if men are able to access longer paternity leave. Designing platforms that accommodate dual-user access and shared notifications can promote collaborative caregiving practices. As illustrated by Anjali’s experience with a school app that enabled both parents to manage care, small technical design changes may help digital infrastructures reflect and reproduce more egalitarian divisions of responsibility. It is important to highlight that a technical change alone will not shift norms, but that it should accompany and reflect broader policy shifts to encourage couples to share this coordinative work.

Inclusivity

These recommendations aim to guide organisational policy and technology design towards greater inclusivity, destigmatising caregiving identities in hybrid work environments and recognising the diverse responsibilities employees hold outside of work.

4. Destigmatise visible caregiving practices via role modelling and digital norms

Organisations seeking to support hybrid working parents should cultivate cultures where caregiving is visible, legitimate, and unpenalized. Managers play a critical role in this process: by openly integrating caregiving tasks into their digitalised workday, such as by blocking out time for school pick-ups or visibly logging off for family duties, they model balanced and transparent practices. Such visibility helps normalise caregiving across all

genders and levels of seniority, reducing stigma in hybrid working arrangements. In my data, participants like Tara and Gary concealed their caregiving duties to align with ideal worker norms, suggesting that visible role-modelling by senior leaders could counteract this culture of concealment. In a similar vein, organisations should remain attentive to how routine scheduling practices can inadvertently disadvantage caregivers. As illustrated in cases like Neelam's, placing key meetings at times that collide with common caregiving responsibilities, such as early mornings when the school-run must normally take place, reinforces exclusionary norms within hybrid arrangements.

Recent campaigning in the UK from activist group 'Parenting Out Loud' echoes this focus on increasing the visibility of caregiving practices, suggesting that fathers in particular be "loud, proud, and transparent about their childcare responsibilities at work [...] by putting school pick-ups in the calendar, using your out of office message to talk about your childcare responsibilities, being open and honest about the need to work from home to take care of your sick child, taking all the paternity leave available and requesting flexible working for childcare reasons" (Rae 2025). This indicates that it may be particularly powerful for men to be transparent in the workplace about caregiving, which aligns with findings shared in Chapter 5, The Hybrid Workplace.

5. Reframe return to office policies as 'anchor days'

Rigid, one-size-fits-all return to office policies imply a desire to return to previous exclusionary, masculinised, ideal worker norms based around presenteeism and constant visibility. Instead, organisations can promote a similar focus on in-person collaboration in the workplace via the alternative language of 'anchor days' (Chung and Yuan 2025). Anchor days are coordinated days where home-working employees come into the office to work collaboratively and promote teamwork. By centring team cohesion rather than surveillance and top-down control, and by avoiding rhetoric that frames home-workers as 'lazy', hybrid work can remain inclusive to those with caregiving responsibilities rather than becoming a stigmatised or 'mommy-track' employment arrangement. Anchor days may therefore help to promote the enactment of the 'inclusive worker norm', which values devotion pluralism (Müller and Chung 2025), while still achieving RTO's purported goal of more in-person collaboration.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses primarily on middle-class, heterosexual, dual-earner households in the UK. Though my purposive sampling strategy necessitated this targeted focus, future research must explore how hybrid working arrangements are navigated by other groups, such as single parents, same-sex couples, and workers from racially minoritized backgrounds. Furthermore, while this study's focus on hybrid work limited its scope to middle-class families, important questions remain about the experience of the mental load for working class families in the

UK, who have thus far been significantly understudied in the sociological literature on cognitive labour, emotional labour, and the mental load.

I could not speak to nor collect diary entries from an equal and comparative number of men and women, due to the difficulties documented in my methodology chapter in recruiting and retaining men to the study. As a result, I adapted my study to focus predominantly on the experiences of women, using insights from their partners or other men in the sample to highlight divergences. Because of this, I could not achieve the same depth into men's rationales and daily lived experiences as I had hoped. Future work could conduct targeted research with men to specifically explore if and how they make sense of and experience the mental load themselves, whether there are 'male-typed' forms of coordinative labour, or how they perceive their partner's experience of the mental load.

The role of digital technologies as platforms that both organised and constituted the subjective experience of working from home emerged as crucial during the data collection process. While my research took a qualitative, sociomaterial approach that considered the use of technologies as entangled with social norms and context, future research could take a closer look at the gendered digital practices of organisation to identify further trends in digital coordinative labour. This could employ a mixed methods or quantitative research approach. For example, Wajcman, Bittman, and Brown (2008) examined whether the mobile phone dissolves the boundaries between work and home via a purpose designed survey and a quantitative analysis of a log of phone calls retrieved from respondents' handsets, finding that phones were most often used to maintain connections with family and friends. A similar study could look at, for instance, among collaborative couples, who puts which kind of event or reminder in the digital family calendar, and whether this reinforces or unsettles gendered divisions of responsibility.

Final Conclusion

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that while hybrid work reconfigures the organisation of family life, it cannot, on its own, achieve gender equality. Only through structural, organisational, and cultural change can the promise of flexibility become genuinely transformative for working parents. Hybrid arrangements offer new temporal and spatial possibilities for parents, creating opportunities for a more care-oriented organisation of life, but they also redistribute the burden of managing these possibilities onto women and primary carers through intensifying the need for and expectations of coordinative labour.

By foregrounding the spatial and temporal coordination that makes flexibility possible, plus the role strain that arises when these domains collide, this thesis shifts the analytical focus from flexibility as an individual choice to flexibility as a sociomaterial practice shaped by gender norms and the current policy framework. In doing so, it challenges narratives that frame hybrid work as a straightforward solution to the work-care conflict. The concept of

coordinative labour provides a framework for understanding why gender inequalities persist even in couples who espouse egalitarian ideals, and why hybrid work can both expand and constrain possibilities for parents. This thesis therefore offers a foundation for future scholarship on the relationship between gender, technology, and the organisation of care.

For hybrid work to transform the work-family axis in favour of the universal caregiver model, it must also be accompanied by structural reforms, organisational cultures that destigmatise caregiving, and technological infrastructures that support shared responsibility. Without these shifts, hybrid work risks simply reshaping inequalities it appears to disrupt. Yet precisely in revealing these limits, it opens a space for reimagining how work might be organised around care rather than against it.

Appendix

Appendix Table 1. Role types of women and men interviewees in the tech sector

Female	20
Advisor	1
Developer	3
Founder	1
Human Resources	2
Product	5
Research	4
Sales	2
Self-employed	2
Male	12
Consultant	2
Developer	3
Founder	2
Product	1
Sales	4

Appendix Table 2. Role types of women and men interviewees in non-tech sectors.

Female	8
Academic	1
Advisor	1
Civil servant	1
PR and Marketing	2
Project manager	1
Self-employed	2
Male	8
Civil servant	1
Engineer	1
Finance	1
Founder	1
PR and Marketing	1
Sales	2
Trust and Safety	1

Interview guide.

Introduction and consent

Hello, and thank you so much for agreeing to take part in this interview. I am a PhD student at Oxford University researching how working parents are experiencing hybrid working arrangements since the COVID-19 pandemic and what this can tell us about work-life balance in the UK tech sector. This interview should take around an hour.

I am really interested in your personal experience and opinions - there are no right or wrong answers! If at any point you would prefer not to answer a question or you do not know the answer, please let me know and we can move to the next question.

This interview is confidential and anonymous. You will not be identifiable from this research. If you have provided consent to be quoted, identifiable characteristics of you and/or your employer will be removed, and you will be pseudonymised in any quotes used. You can stop the interview or withdraw your consent at any point during this interview. After the interview, you will be able to withdraw your consent for participation in this study until 01 October 2024, after which point the data will be used for my analysis.

Thanks again for taking part, and please do let me know if you would like me to clarify or rephrase the question as we go through.

Themes: Workplace norms, gender strategies, work-life conflict, division of labour

Section A: Background questions:

1. Can you confirm your role and the company you work for?
2. How long have you been in this role?
3. How long have you been in the company?
4. Which area do you live in?
5. Can you confirm how many children you have and their ages?
6. Can you tell me the industry your partner works in and what kind of role they have?

Section B: Hybrid work

7. I'm hoping to start by learning a bit about what work is like for you. Can you describe your current hybrid work arrangement for me?

Prompts: how long have you had this arrangement for? Is this a formal arrangement or informally agreed with your manager? Do you have set office and work from home days? How many other people are doing hybrid work at your company? Why do you do it?

8. Describe your average day when you are working from home.

Prompts: where do you work when you work from home? What do you wear? Are there certain tasks you only do at home? Do you join meetings online and what are these like? Do you feel productive at home? Are you interrupted much at home? Can you describe what communication and collaboration is like?

9. Describe your average day when you are working in the office.

Prompts: how long is your commute? Do you have meetings in the office? Do you feel productive in the office? Are you interrupted in the office? What do you wear to the office? What is your communication and collaboration like in the office?

10. Comparing working from home and working in the office, what is the difference? Which do you prefer?

Prompts: Do many of your colleagues have hybrid working arrangements? How is hybrid work 'seen' in your workplace?

11. What is the best thing about hybrid work for you? What would you change? Why?

12. Is working different now since before the pandemic? How? If tomorrow your employer decided to require in-person only work, what would it change for you?

13. In an ideal world, what would your working week look like? Why?

(If time)

14. What is your employer's policy on hybrid work?

Prompt: When did hybrid work 'begin' in your workplace?

Section C: Childcare and the domestic

15. Now we're going to talk a little bit about work-life balance and your family life. Can you describe your current childcare arrangement to me?

Prompts: how do you divide childcare? Who is responsible for what? Has this changed since you began hybrid work? Would either you or your partner describe yourself as 'primary caregiver'? Do you have external childcare help?

16. Can you describe how you and your partner divide up household tasks, like cooking, cleaning, and household repair and maintenance?

Prompts: Has this changed since you began hybrid work? When do you complete these tasks?

17. Why do you divide up the responsibilities in this way? Is this your preferred way of dividing up responsibilities? Do you see any difficulties or drawbacks in arranging

things this way?

Section D: Work-life balance

18. How do you like to spend your free time? When you have free time, who do you spend it with? How often do you get free time?
19. When do you spend time together as a family? What kind of activities do you enjoy doing together?
20. Thinking about yourself, if you could have things just the way you wanted – in terms of work, leisure, and childcare, what would be your ideal balance?

Prompts: Would you like to make anything a first priority, or would you prefer an equal balance, or is there another arrangement you would prefer? How does your current situation compare with this ideal balance?

Section E: To finish

21. Thinking about the future, what do you think your life will be like five years from now? Why?

Prompts: best-case scenario, worst-case scenario.

22. Have your goals for the future changed since you were a child? Why do you think this is?
23. We've come to the end of my questions - thank you so much for your time today. Is there anything that you feel we haven't covered that would be relevant? E.g. as a parent, are there other elements that shape the experience of work for you that I haven't touched on?

(If appropriate) Introduction to the ethnographic element:

I'm speaking to lots of parents like you who are working in the tech sector. After I've completed this set of interviews, I'll be moving to the next phase of my research, where I'll be doing a slightly deeper dive into the experience of hybrid work using digital diary studies using an app downloadable to your phone. Your perspective and experiences have been so valuable today – is this something you would be interested in finding out more about?

Please do let me know if you have any further thoughts about what we talked about today. Is it okay for me to get in touch with you if I have any questions or clarifications?

1. First iteration of diary study invite email:

Dear [name]

I really enjoyed our chat and as I move into the next phase of my research, I would love to invite you to the next phase of my research: an online diary study using the mobile phone app Fieldnotes.

This diary study is aimed at gaining a more in-depth understanding of the everyday rhythms, and rituals of life for parents with hybrid working arrangements, plus give them a space to reflect on the emotional quality of their days.

Overview of the study

This diary will run over a two-week time frame. You will be asked to provide descriptions of your day on three days of your choice, each week – a total of **six days across two weeks**.

If possible and applicable, please try to provide descriptions of a day working at home, a day in the office, and a day on the weekend each week. However, if you do not attend the office weekly, please simply provide descriptions of your day working at home instead.

It will be up to you and your schedule when you decide to answer these. It might be immediately, or in the evening of the same day. Ideally, the prompts are answered as close to the time as you can manage - but don't worry too much if not!

This app enables you to upload audio, images, and videos taken on your phone. You can upload multiple media per prompt. You are welcome to narrate verbally via video/audio and upload the video/audio with a short caption if you prefer this to text.

Your insights will feed into my PhD thesis, but you will be fully anonymised and unidentifiable by the study.

When?

This diary study would take place over two weeks any time between now and June 2024.

If you are interested and would like to chat more, please let me know and we can arrange a time.

Thanks again,
Lily

2. Second iteration of diary study invite email:

Dear [Name],

It's so great to hear from you! Thank you for getting in touch and connecting on LinkedIn. I'd really love to have you onboard.

To give you an overview, here is what participation would involve:

1. Participation in a diary study. This involves answering 'day in the life' prompts on three days over the course of one week, plus two extra photo-based tasks that can be completed using pre-existing photos from your camera roll. I estimate that the tasks take no longer than 5 minutes to complete each, though of course you are free to spend as much time as you like on them!
2. One 30-minute interview (can be via Teams, phone, or in-person) after the study to reflect on the experience and to answer any follow-up questions.

I've attached a consent form and information sheet to this email.

The diary study will be via an app called [Field Notes](#). It's fairly intuitive to use, and you can complete your entries via text, photo, audio, or video. Some have found that completing entries via voice note is the most time effective!

If this all sounds okay to you, and you're happy to proceed, I will send you an invitation link to Field Notes and you will be able to download the app to your phone with all of the tasks loaded up. Then you're free to start the study whenever suits you!

If you've got any questions, please do let me know and I'm always happy to jump on a call if preferred.

All the very best and thanks again,
Lily

Example of a diary study entry (partially used for vignette in chapter 6).

Monday 11th March.

Alarm woke me at 6.40am.

I woke my middle son for his shower.

Whilst he was showering I started to make packed lunches for two of my three children. My youngest has school dinners.

Once middle son was out of shower I woke eldest for his shower. Youngest woke at same time and so I made him breakfast and gave him his inhaler.

Eldest and middle made their own breakfasts and husband came down to take over clean up whilst I got dressed.

Once dressed I made sure two eldest children had their packed lunches and middle child had PE kit and they left for bus to school at 7.45am. I then finished packing my bag for work trip to London and got youngest dressed for school. At 8.20am I walked youngest to school and back home again. Found out my first train was cancelled so husband drove me to the next station at 10am. I caught the train to London at 10.40am. Did work prep on the train. Arrived in London at 12.55pm and walked to office.

On the train I also updated online food shop, topped up lunch money accounts for older children and responded to work emails.

I felt stressed due to train issues and the reason I was on my way to London was to host a webinar. I also worried that I had forgotten to pass information on to my husband about the kids, or if I had missed an activity the school was doing.

In the afternoon I worked in the office until 5.30pm. I attended planning sessions and rehearsals for the webinar the next day. I felt very stressed as I had not hosted a webinar before and there was a large number of attendees registrations. My husband text me around 3.30pm to let me know that the children were safely home from school. At 5.30pm I left the office and went to the local Sainsburys to pick up some food (sushi, carrots and dip and a melon pot). I walked to my hotel and checked in. I text my husband to let him know I was at the hotel and ate my food around 6pm. At 6.20pm I FaceTimed my husband and spoke to him and the children for 15mins. Reminded husband to give youngest his inhaler and asked if eldest had his asthma tablet. I felt calmer seeing my husband and sons. It was lovely to chat with them and be reminded of home. At 6.40pm I started practising for the webinar using notes and my MacBook. My colleague who was organising the webinar messaged me repeatedly until 8pm. I finished my practice at 9pm and got ready for bed. I put the TV on and updated the online food shop. I went to sleep around midnight, slept on and off worrying about the webinar. I felt very stressed and alone.

Appendix Table 3: Codebook

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
Top-level theme	Affect and Emotions	The affective and emotional states described by participants.		
Sub-theme	Negative emotions			
Code	Anger	Including moments of conflict within the couple, resentment due to uneven cognitive loads or access to uninterrupted leisure time, and anger at unfair treatment or bias at work.	“He wouldn't necessarily think to do it - it wouldn't be off his own back. And that's where sometimes I get a bit cross, he'll be like, I'll like, oh, we need to do this and this. He's like, well, make me a list. I'm like, I'm not your manager.”	Interview
Code	Guilt	Expressions of guilt predominantly revolve around the care of children e.g. ‘snapping at children’ when tired or overwhelmed, for sending their child to afterschool club rather than care for them, for working away from the family and leaving the care responsibilities to their spouse, for working at home while children are present.	“Days when I’m solo parenting around work are very draining and I feel guilty that I didn’t spend more time more actively with the kids, like playing games with them but it’s a struggle to fit everything else into the evening.”	Diary

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
Code	Shame	Experiences of shame generally relate to managing one's perception as a caregiver at work, e.g. being disrupted by children during work calls, leaving the office early to collect children, not being contactable during school pick-ups.	"I might just have to leave early, go in, but leave early. But the thing is that at that point nobody's really leaving the office when I'd have to leave. So it does feel, when I've had to do that before, it does feel a bit like a walk of shame."	Interview
Code	Stress	Feelings of stress arising from e.g. time pressure, high workload, juggling work and care.	"I felt stressed due to train issues and the reason I was on the way to London was to host a webinar. I worried that I had forgot to pass information on to my husband about my kids, or if I had missed an activity the school was doing."	Diary
Code	Tiredness	The feelings of tiredness that result from managing work and care, and the associated emotional labour to manage this.	"Bedtime with the two of them when I'm tired is probably my least favourite time of the week because	Diary

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			I feel I should enjoy it and actually I'm snappy and impatient and it's really difficult."	
Sub-theme	Positive emotions			
Code	Feeling lucky or fortunate	Expressions of luck, gratitude, and a sense of good fortune for having certain conditions met e.g. a flexible role to enable time spent with family, an understanding and open workplace, an equal partnership with spouse, childcare support from family.	"I always feel very lucky to get the chance to do bath and stories with the kids almost every night."	Diary
Code	Fun and enjoyment	A sense of joy, fulfilment, and fun e.g. when spending time with children, when working in a fulfilling role.	It has been a busy but productive morning and I really enjoyed watching the football training, even though it was freezing!!	Diary
Top-level theme	Childcare and Domestic Labour	Descriptions of how couples divide and perceive childcare and domestic labour.		
Sub-theme	Care infrastructure and outsourcing			
Code	Nursery and schools	Descriptions of children currently at primary school.	"And I've got four year old twins, a girl	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			and boy who they were in nursery up until this summer. And then they've just started at school this September.”	
Code	Outsourced care	Descriptions and justifications for outsourced care and household labour e.g. cleaners/nanny	“Before that we also hired a dedicated nanny kind of thing, look after her, and yeah, it's been tricky because I think my wife was super keen to go back to the adult world as regime working.”	Interview
Code	Relational networks	Descriptions of care provided by extended relational networks e.g. grandparents, other parents, or the inability for extended networks to provide care. Elder care is included here.	“So two days a week for my little one, my two year old, there is one day where I take him to my dad's house and my wife does the same.”	Interview
Sub-theme	Daily routines			
Code	Household chores	Descriptions of routine household labour	“I did a few chores in the kitchen and then we settled down to watch some telly in the evening.”	Diary

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
Code	Morning routine	Descriptions of the morning routine	<p>“I wake up in the morning before the kids wake up, trying to sort out the school run, getting dressed, pack lunches, all that paraphernalia. And the kids normally out by about eight, quarter past eight, and once they leave the house and again, my wife's a teacher, she has to be in person. So once she leaves the house often, but not always with them, then I go straight to work.”</p>	Interview
Sub-theme	Gendered divisions of labour			
Code	Childcare split	Descriptions of how couples divide care, including their justifications for why e.g. ‘she’s the better planner’, ‘I’m the main caregiver’ and moments of renegotiation.	<p>“I think I was always very much, um, the main caregiver mom. Not that he's not present, he completely is. Um, but you know, for example, if</p>	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			the kids are unwell at school or nursery and we get called it, the default is that I will do it.”	
Code	Domestic labour division	Descriptions of how couples divide domestic labour, including justifications for why e.g. I enjoy organizing the home, and moments of renegotiation.	“So I'm very lucky in that we are quite an equal team, as far as we can be.”	Interview
Sub-theme	Mental load			
Code	Coordination	Descriptions of coordinating and logistics of care e.g. ‘ad hoc communications’, aligning diaries with spouse, organizing pick-ups, organizing family time, looking after sick children, the development of communication practices within the couple.	“We do like I will always put things in [spouse’s] diary. He was recently been diagnosed with ADHD. So those things are not necessarily as easy for him. So we do try and look at like on the weekend. Like what's coming up and like making sure stuff is in my diary.	Interview
Code	Organising school	Descriptions of ‘school admin’ e.g. booking afterschool clubs, arranging care	“there's a WhatsApp group that is all moms and that's where	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		during school holidays, school communications, and whatsapp groups.	all the updates of what's needed happens. Um, there's parent mail, so another online app that the school communicates through and I'm the one signed up to that and not him.”	
Code	Male perspective on mental load	Male responses to questions about the ‘mental load’	‘It's not a concept I've heard a great deal about actually.’	Interview
Code	Managing screen time	Monitoring the child’s screen time.	“I mean, he will play by himself because the other thing is we try and limit screen time and we don't really want to just stick him in front of the electronic nanny all the time, which is the TV or his tablet, so it's really difficult because that is the easy option.”	Interview
Code	Planning and monitoring household tasks	Monitoring household tasks e.g. food orders, ironing, washing school uniforms	“So I placed a food shop on the sofa while watching Tracy	Diary

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			Solomon and got that ready so I could collect it while my older one would be at gymnastics.”	
Code	Technology use for mental load	Technological tools and techniques e.g. digital shared calendars, ‘calendar blocking’.	“I also put in some time for what I call a fire break two hours in the middle of the day. Quite often that gets encroached on by business things but it's there really to make sure that I've got some head space especially for families at home so working from home being able to take a couple of hours making sure that I've got a clear lunch break.”	Diary
Top-level theme	Work Practices and Arrangements	Merged remote work practices, office routines, scheduling behaviours, and visibility at work under a broader category of hybrid work management and time coordination.		
Sub-	Meetings and			0

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
theme	Office Culture			
Code	Collaboration and communication	Descriptions of collaborative work in-person, including formalized meetings and informal interactions, e.g. 'asking little questions'.	"It was quite nice to be in the office face-to-face. You can just ask those little questions. You just face the person next to you and ask the question rather than team's message which you would have to do if you're working at home	Interview
Code	Office attendance and logistics	Descriptions of who works in the office with what kind of regularity, the logistics of travelling to an office e.g. commuting costs	"so London-based workers do tend to go in a bit more and they can go in as much or as little as they want."	Interview
Code	Productivity and work processes	Reflections on work that takes place in an office e.g. how productive or unproductive one feels, interruptions, work flows and systems.	"When I come into the office, you have to say your hello there's. People come up to you, ask you questions, so I just find it a lot easier to do certain things at home."	Interview
Code	Social dynamics and belonging	Descriptions of workplace socialities during working hours and after e.g. after work drinks.	"Whereas I think when you're in, when it's a hybrid solution,	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		Reflections on new joiners.	people are like chatting to you one on social occasion, I'm like, you need to stop talking to me so we can get some work."	
Sub-theme	Remote and Hybrid Work		0	
Code	Attitudes towards working from home	Descriptions of the attitudes and sentiments shared about working from home e.g. expectations shifting after the pandemic, experiencing increased autonomy.	"I think what's changed is that we there's just that extra well, we've all learned to work in a way that we don't have to be in the same place at the same time. So it's really opened things up."	Interview
Code	Current working arrangement	Descriptions of current working arrangement e.g. how many days in the office and at home, whether this agreement is formalized, whether the participant was required to negotiate for this agreement.	"The policy is that everyone needs to come into the office on a Tuesday, but I choose to come in Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and work from home on a Wednesday."	Interview
Code	Productivity and Work processes	Reflections on work that takes place at home, e.g. how productive one feels, difficulties learning, the	"even though we'll be on teams meetings a lot, it's never quite the same. And I think the	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		ability or lack thereof to collaborate with colleagues, the sense of gaining time, the ability to control one's environment.	collaborative working is more difficult online.”	
Code	Managing staff remotely	Descriptions of the approaches and techniques used to manage staff remotely, e.g. creating check-in points, maintaining social connections, and the difficulties of measuring progress or managing different personalities.	“The guy that I onboarded and was a line for, he's actually in the office today, but he usually works in Birmingham. So I think that made it especially difficult because we're not in the same parent office. So I didn't meet him until sort of three months into his contract”	Interview
Sub-theme	Temporal dimensions of work			
Code	Experiences of time	Qualitative descriptions of time e.g. temporal density, fragmented time,	‘The the most difficult thing with the model that we've got is the fragmented time and I'm quite good at that. I quite enjoy it. What I mean by that is one minute I'm starting,	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			you know, one piece of a project and and just and talking with someone. Then I get a message pop up from a client that looks really urgent. So I'll go over and do that and then I've got another meeting on something unrelated.”	
Code	Work extensification	Descriptions of work taking place beyond standard working hours e.g. at the weekend, on holiday	“Once the boys were tucked into bed, I took the baby to my room and fed her whilst reopening my laptop one last time. I had one more outstanding task and needed to book a desk and parking space for the office the next day.”	Diary
Code	Work intensification	Descriptions of intensity of working days and rhythms	“So the pace that tech companies tend to work at because you're trying to get things live and out	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			and you have live clients and it's fast and it's quick”	
Sub-theme	Trust and Visibility		0	
Code	Building trust and loyalty at work	Reflections on how trust is developed in a hybrid or remote model, including being present at ‘key moments’, working visibly, adopting a ‘give and take’ approach, building trust based on output not presenteeism, staying in an over running meeting.	And maybe it's a trust thing. I think fundamentally , if you're remote, first you have to trust that your employees will do the work that you've employed them for. Whereas my previous company, although were remote because of COVID they are now back in the office. I think that's a trust thing because the employees had proved for three years that they could work remotely and still deliver and yet as soon as the pandemic was kind of we'd moved on a little bit from that, it was	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			like, right, I'll come back in again.	
Code	Strategic visibility and perception management	Cultivating visibility to manage perception via visibility at the right time online, sitting in the 'right place' in the office.	so that's this new, like hot desk is new to me. And also the fact that people are talking, it's in an area where you, it's whatever they call it active area. So I tend not to be there. I tend to go into the space in the building where we, it's like a library, if you will, and you can be much more quiet. But then that means that, that our manager doesn't see us all the time, you know. And it's just recently that it occurred to me that maybe she wants to see our faces and that's how she equates how much we work.	Interview
Code	Presence and contactability	Demonstrations of presence e.g. being contactable (or not), joining	I'm quite careful not to let there be a friction point.	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		important meetings, socializing in person.	So there's something that's come up that's I'm trying to think back. In all the time I've been at this job, have I ever had a moment where my colleagues knew I had to stop to go and do kids? Very unusual. I can't even remember that happening.	
Sub-theme	Work Technologies		9	
	Clashing tech systems	Descriptions of difficulties with tech system compatibilities.	There's a couple of stakeholders in the subcontractors organization who I use WhatsApp for and text messages even just cause that's just a bit easier. But yeah, that's one thing we never figured out is getting people onto the same system.	Interview
	Collaborative technologies	Descriptions of collaborative remote work styles common in tech	Yeah, so it's similar to basically Coda, what	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		<p>e.g. Teams calls, daily stand-ups, and other apps.</p>	<p>we use is similar to Notion, but just imagine like a I guess like an internal wiki with a much better interface, but what's interesting is like, and I'm saying it in a very meta way because that's what I've been analyzing in terms of like how you build communities into a product. But every time I land on a page, I know who is viewing, you know, that page or what other people's avatars are. Like, are they on another page of this, like, contents page, if that makes sense? So instantly you see who's on which page. So like that's kind of an interesting one because today I saw that the product</p>	

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			<p>director, for instance, randomly went onto a page that I was writing to give to the first team in terms of my thoughts and how we evolve the homepage. And I'm thinking, why was he like on my page? It looked, it felt a bit like spying.</p>	
	Personal technologies	Descriptions of use of personal technologies e.g. calendars, emails, LinkedIn	<p>I start by catching up on emails that came in during the later half of last week (my working days for this company are only Monday and Tuesday so there are usually a number of emails to action/reply to on Monday morning).</p>	Diary
Top-level code	Values and Aspirations	Consolidated career motivations, family values, and future planning (e.g. redundancy fears, dreams of autonomy or	0	

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		travel) under career-life trajectories.		
Sub-theme	Career trajectories		0	
Code	Financial logics and trade-offs	Decisions that are framed as 'financially driven' e.g. for choosing one partner to be more flexible than the other, or for woman leaving the labour market, or prioritizing flexibility over career progression while children are young.	And you know it wasn't always easy, but I think we've got the the balance about right now to to the point where again a lot of our decisions tend to be financially driven. But from a financial perspective, there's no real reason for her to go back to work.	Interview
Code	Care-based logics	Logics that balance financial decisions with care decisions e.g. choosing flexibility over a higher paid job, the sense that career progression requires greater time in work, which is incompatible with care needs.	I was then offered this job at this VC firm for £200,000 a year and me and [husband] had to sit down and have a conversation about that - like how would that work in terms of school pickups and how would that work in terms of clubs	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			<p>and [husband] just said if you want to go for it, we'll make it work. If you're earning that amount of money, you get a fucking nanny like you know what I mean? Like, there are things that we could do to make it work. So I don't want you to not take it because of logistical reasons. And I thought a lot about it. And I thought actually. If that role is coming up now, there is a chance that role will be available when [my son] doesn't need me as much. So I'm going to continue to put [my son] first and then the family and that dynamic first.</p>	
Code	Gendered work decisions	Decisions based on prioritizing women's career progression and	"I would hope that even though it's financially	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		choices	<p>might not make that much sense. I think people in particular women, they've gained so much from going to work. I mean, okay, this is maybe, I Acknowledge it depends massively on the type of work, but I think in the long run, financially it makes sense.</p>	
Sub-theme	Family orientation		0	
	Nature and the outdoors as family wellbeing practice	The sense that spending time outdoors, in nature, screen-free with family, is healthy, 'lovely', 'calming', and that sitting at a desk all day is boring.	<p>Yeah, the outdoors is really important to us. I think that's a very calming place for everyone and we try and be screen free around those times we have an allotment. So we go there and the kids have got like, a little Wendy house there and they'll do. You know, they've got their own little flower.</p>	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			Sort of raised that they can kind of dig in. You know, a lot of going to the park, play dates with friends	
	Prioritizing time with children and family	The value of 'being present' with children everyday and cultivating work routines around this value.	I think, you know, actually as you grow up as well, it's just nice to know that your parents are sort of around in the house, and you know, you can go to see if you've got any problems, and yeah, that's why it was important to me. That was the type of mum I wanted to be. I wanted to be a mum that was very much around.	Interview
	Structuring work to enable family life	Working compressed, flexible, or part-time hours to prioritize quality time with family and children at important and routine moments.	Yeah, so I personally being able to work from home is phenomenally important and it has been brilliant. I have done, especially before we	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			<p>started, we were already working from home when our first time went to primary school and the amount, I had a lot more contact with teachers than I ever could have anticipated with. I didn't think I'd be doing quite as many school drop-offs at regular time rather than at breakfast club and school pickups at regular time rather than at afterschool club. And so I do get a lot more face time with the teacher than I had ever thought I would get.</p>	
	Valuing everyday shared routines	Descriptions of daily shared routines that provide moments of connection and quality time with children and partner.	Yeah, and then we did the crossword together. We always do that, which is a crossword in The New York Times, some games from that.	Diary

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
Sub-theme	Future orientation		0	
Code	Childhood influences and long-held visions	Aspirations held from childhood; whether they remained similar, or changed over time; family-oriented, career-oriented.	I kind of just assumed I'd get married and have kids I don't know, I never really sort of wanted to stray from that path but then I never really set out that's what I was gonna that's what was definitely gonna happen it kind of all just did and	Interview
Code	Personal aspirations	Descriptions of personal aspirations that broadly reflect the cultivation of greater autonomy, creativity, and self-expression, plus desires to help others e.g. mentor other women.	I do like to spend to have a good time, sort of, you know, food, merriment, entertainment, whichever water, sports being active, I like that. Right. So my ideal situation would have been to detach myself from a job that locks me here.	Interview
Code	Uncertainty and contingency	Expressions of anxiety and uncertainty about the future, and any contingency plans to mitigate risk. Fear of redundancy or	Yeah, of course I'm worried. I mean, in this, in the world of tech right now, rounds of	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		restructure.	redundancies seems to be just the latest thing to do, whether you need them or not, quite frankly, and it's another topic that really infuriates me at the moment.	
Top-level code	5 Gender Norms	Unified gendered expectations, bias, and fatherhood/motherhood narratives into a theme examining the reproduction and contestation of gender norms in work and care.	0	
Sub-theme	Experiences of gender bias and discrimination at work		0	
Code	Stigma during and after maternity leave	Fears of and experiences of stigma about announcing pregnancy, maternity leave, and returning from maternity leave.	I think maybe there's, you know, there's anxiety around. I don't know, maybe this is also being female around, you know, being worried when you tell an employer that you're pregnant or like, I don't	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			know, revealing those things that suggest you're not 100% in it feels scary.	
Code	Paternity leave	Experiences of paternity leave, including the idea that they are not given enough time, that shared parental leave might be viewed negatively, or that their allowance was 'pretty good'.	So my company is pretty good, I think, with paternity leave. They give us six weeks. Okay. And yeah, my director at the time, actually, when I had my first, gave me some really good advice to not take that six week period all in one block and split it up into three blocks, which is what I did.	Interview
Code	Discriminatory beliefs held by managers	The sense that management hold stigmatizing or discriminatory beliefs about working mothers	And so that's kind of something that's always at the back of my mind that I think he thinks the working arrangement is not what it should be. I think maybe in his head, the working commitment	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			for a mother of young children is two days a week.	
Code	Belief by participants that they must conceal their caring responsibilities	Descriptions of the ways women conceal their caring responsibilities at work to avoid stigma	I've intentionally done it so that the days that I'm in the office, I don't have any child care pick up responsibilities. My husband does that. Okay. Which from experience I decided that's a good way of not being tarred with the working mum brush.	Interview
Code	Sexism and bias in tech	Descriptions of sexism and bias specific to the tech sector, e.g. bias in job ads, bias against female founders, the idea that commercial interests must come before gender equity, 'boys club' mentality in technical roles.	you know, putting job ads out was very gendered and nobody... Nobody had looked at it. You know, nobody had said, oh, this is gendered. And until I think I came along, I was like, OK, a woman is going to look at this and say, I have to have all these 73 criteria. And	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			then we'll say, I have 50 I can apply. So you're not going to get as many women because you've done it this way.	
Sub-theme	Fatherhood		0	
	Perceptions of dads by other parents	Descriptions of how other parents view dads who participate in care, 'treated like a hero'.	I was doing all the drop-offs, and inevitably there'd be a group of mums, and I'd be like the only dad, or one of the only dads. And I was treated like an absolute hero, you know, like there was sort of like beacon of equality or whatever. And I thought, literally, I'm just picking up my kids, the same thing that you're doing is picking up your kids.	Interview
	Perceptions of dads at work	Descriptions of how men experience being treated by their workplace once they become a father, e.g. 'from a boy to a man'.	i have a theory around this - when i became a parent, suddenly it was like the senior	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			management saw me as becoming a man from a boy, it was like if i could manage the responsibilities of the household i could manage responsibilities in the workplace	
	Managing work and care	Descriptions of how men segment work and care e.g. 'getting into dad mode'	I'd be more stressed by certain home interactions like immediately just be [thinks] I think most I noticed it when I was coming home that I wouldn't be quite ready to be in dad mode with the kids and they don't understand why I'm still thinking about some work problem you know so it was more trickier and I was needing more space when I arrived home	Interview
	Beliefs	The beliefs shared	I really enjoy	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
	about and experiences of fatherhood	by men about fatherhood e.g. dads should be present for their kids, they enjoy seeing their children, they are 'not good' at homework or planning.	that stuff, I enjoy being involved in the rigmarole of child rearing	ew
	Motherhood		0	
	Managing health and emotional atmosphere	Descriptions of how and why mothers manage the mood and health of the children	this was a standard Sunday morning for us, we prioritise eating together and eating home cooked food with no ultra processed ingredients. A positive start to the day!	Diary
	Intensive and aspirational parenting practices	Descriptions of the extra curricular activities children are enrolled on and organized by women.	So there was a point where he was doing art club on a Monday at school. And then going straight from Art Club to Brazilian soccer school. Which was about half an hour drive away in Leighton Buzzard on a Monday. He was then doing	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			<p>gymnastics. Now be on a Tuesday afternoon, afternoon club and Beavers on a Wednesday. We don't have Thursday and Friday free. And then Saturday morning he was doing Karate Saturday afternoon and doing Stagecoach and then Sunday morning, he was doing swimming and from and that's because that's all the things he was asking to do.</p>	
	Stereotypes and expectations	Descriptions of the gendered stereotypes and expectations of motherhood observed by women	<p>And then there's all this whole societal thing of, now that a woman can have it all, it's like, well, why do we bloody want it all? We kind of put this pressure on us to be a work, I mean, obviously financially, yes, but it's</p>	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			like, you can be career driven and you can do this and you can do that and you can do this. And it's like, well, actually as humans, we can't do all those things successfully.	
	6 Company Culture and Structures	Merged insights on management attitudes, return to office dynamics, and organisational structures to explore how institutions shape parental experience.		
Sub-theme	Culture and management			
Code	Attitude toward parents at work	Descriptions of participants perception of their workplace's attitude towards parenting and those with caring responsibilities, including whether or not there is an 'open' parenting culture, whether colleagues share their caring responsibilities, and whether children can appear on work calls.	But I think generally the attitude towards parents is really, really good because a lot of people are parents, right, and they've been through it themselves. So they're understanding in that sense.	Interview
Co	Trade-off	The belief that	Yeah, I think,	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
de	between care and output	delivering quality output remotely offsets the time spent on caring responsibilities during the working day.	um, it's very flexible. He's really relaxed. Um, and I think ultimately if you are doing the work and also willing to be flexible or you know, do things outside of when you might normally technically need to do them. Um, it's kind of that give and take approach.	ew
Sub-theme	Role of management			
Code	Gender/care responsibilities of management shapes attitudes to parents	The belief that the gender of management shapes the dominant attitude and perception of parents in each workplace, e.g. managers who 'role model' create a culture of openness, and management without childcare responsibilities are less open.	The differences are huge, so I think there's a lot because the company I'm at now is almost. It's been found like people who are the founders and the C-level are all people who have kids, and there's a lot of women as well.	Interview
Sub-theme	Return to office policies		15	
Code	Implicit resistance	Perceptions or experiences of	I think maybe people will	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		implicitly resisting RTOs rather than overtly pushing back	ask for forgiveness or permission. I don't think they always come in. For the three days.	
Code	Formalisation of RTO	Descriptions of whether RTOs are formalized into employment contract or informally enforced	When I was at my previous company, when they did something not quite so similar, but they extended the working hours at my previous company from 9:00 to 5:00 to 9:00 to 5:30, and they reissued every single person's contract and made them sign it. So. So if they're serious, I guess they're gonna see how things go with the request before they they turn to that.	Interview
Code	Ability to 'push back'	Perceptions held by participants that they could or could not 'push back' or resist return to office mandates, based on their level of importance to the organization or	"I'd probably have said, well, I would feel it's unnecessary, but I would have very little to stand on in protesting."	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		their sense of precarity		
Code	Rationale for RTO	Reports of participants assumptions about why RTO mandates have been issued, such as ‘backdoor restructures’, office costs, to impress investors with offices, because of the ideologies of CEOs, and because Big Tech set the trend.	“It's a way of getting rid of the next wave of people.”	Interview
Code	Critiques of RTOs	Descriptions of negative views of RTOs, including poor office management, virtual meeting-based work, barriers to caring responsibilities, and people who live too far to commute.	Personally, my concerns are that the one of the kind of the unintended consequences of this could be that they end up inadvertently rolling back some of the diversity and inclusion work that they've worked so hard on over the last couple of years because some people like myself have caring responsibilities for the family	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
Code	Benefits of RTOs	Description of positive views of RTOs, including the idea that collaboration leads to productivity, and that face-to-face time is valuable to the worker.	Yeah, I think it's probably multidimensional, like the loss, less productivity, less ideas for future products or directions and problem solving	Interview
Sub-theme	Tech sector dynamics		0	
Code	DEI	Descriptions of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives at work.	They're just bastards when it comes, when it, when the pressure's on, it's not about the people, it's about the numbers. Actually, they really don't. So all this kind of us best employer and do you know, DEI and all the fluffy stuff actually is not real when it comes to the crunch.	Interview
Code	International and global dynamics	Descriptions of the globalized nature of work.	we have some clients we engage with now worldwide global clients, North American clients who've never met	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			<p>them, we've never been face-to-face with them. But we've worked them for years.</p>	
Code	Link between work culture and structure	The links made by participants between the work culture in their organization and structural changes in tech, e.g. linking series c round funding with RTO mandates, IPO linked with increased DEI efforts, and the pace of work relating to the amount of funding available.	<p>So the reason it's been asked is because it's just had a series C round with a big investor from the states, and that means that the companies very much gonna change, I think over the next couple of years. But they definitely want to like move to. Of a kind of in person vibe, and they're gonna have like, I mean investors coming around things like that. So they want the culture to change, to be a more in person workplace at the moment.</p>	Interview
Code	Tech recruitment	Descriptions of the recruitment dynamics in tech.	<p>when you think about diverse hires,</p>	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			<p>or specifically talking about gender diversity in the tech space, because there's only 20% of female engineers as a whole in the workforce. So when you think about that, and then you put that into the mix of working in a structure where it's all about timing and speed and go, go, go. Those two things don't mix because if you've got a job that you need to fill, you're not going to take the time and the diligence and care needed to reach out to women because it's so difficult.</p>	
Code	When compared with 'traditional' working models	Comparisons made by participants between tech and other sectors, and how that shapes the culture	Yeah we've got some customers in the banking world and based in London and they all went back to the	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
			office fairly quickly after the pandemic and I think that's just because of the culture in banking it's completely different to some other sectors	
	7 Work-Life Interface		0	
Sub-theme	Challenges and trade-offs of WFH		8	
Code	Blurred boundaries between work and home	Descriptions of blurred boundaries between work and home, lack of psychological reset, difficulties 'context switching', being strict with boundary setting.	The downside of that is it means it slices into all of my time. So you know my office is right here. It's in the main house. So I don't have an outside office and that psychological break is difficult sometimes, but it does mean that I can take time out during the day, especially. It's a nice day.	Interview
Code	Emotional and cognitive load	Descriptions of pressures to maintain constant availability and to keep the home	I think it's because you're at home, there's an expectation	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		'perfect'.	that everything at home should be perfect as well. But actually, I am doing a full working day, and so I can't shift the kind of mindset of, like, oh, I should have got the washing done, or I should have got that done, whereas when I'm in the office, I just like to focus on work.	
Code	Interrupted care	Descriptions of how care interrupts work and work interrupts care when children are at home.	Yeah, so I try and make sure that I have my meetings during the time when he's at school so that I can then do the other work, so I can have the door open and I can listen out for him.	Interview
Code	Overwork and availability	Descriptions of pressures to be available to employer and extending working hours beyond traditional times e.g. into the weekend, evening,	Whereas now, if you have a sick child, you're guilty because you're not constantly looking after them or sitting there or	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		and on holiday.	cuddling them, because you're having to work as well, because your boss says, it doesn't matter if they're sick, let them stay at home. Then you're like, Well, I still have to work.	
Su b- the me	Evolving practices and priorities		1	
Co de	Learning from past struggles	Descriptions of struggling to balance work with family and care in previous working arrangements.	Um, although not currently working as a gp. Um, so I trained as a gp, did it for a couple of years, had [00:01:00] children and maternity leave breaks, and found the balance really difficult and was looking to do something a little bit outside, just plain clinical work.	Intervi ew
Co de	Prioritizin g family over work	Descriptions of shifting prioritization since having children that impact the career decisions and working	I mean, part of that decision to move towards a portfolio career has been around	Intervi ew

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		arrangement decisions being made.	the need to balance family needs and because I've been, I've become very senior in one of the large agencies before my son - my other son - was born, I knew what was possible. And I knew what was required to you know, maintain work at that level. I don't live in London. So you know, I couldn't carry on living the life that I used to live where I would be on a train at 6:30 in the morning and I'd get home at 10:00 at night. Like it just wasn't compatible with family life.	
Su b- the me	Institutional support		5	
Co de	Work-life policies	Descriptions of work policies that support family life, commitments, and caring	Because at my current workplace, they have six months paid	Intervi ew

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		responsibilities.	maternity leave and they have a no questions asked policy. You can take a month off if you have a miscarriage, including like failed rounds of IVF, and there was not any single policy in place at all within my original employer who's a very large company in the UK.	
Su b- the me	Perceived benefits of working in the home		1	
Co de	Benefits for family life	Perceived benefits of WFH for family life, including taking children to doctor's appointments, doing school drop-offs and pickups, spending more time with children, and saving money on childcare.	I'm also able to go and pick up my eldest son middle child from school because he's got a meeting tonight for his lifeguard training, and it's nice to be able to pick him up and spend half an hour in the car with him having a catch up before Friday is complete	Diary

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
Code	Career benefits	Perceived benefits of WFH for career, including staying in one's career as a woman while balancing care responsibilities, and improving one's sense of productivity.	I think I'm probably more productive. Um, working at home, I probably sit and work at a desk more than I would if I was in an office and chatting to colleagues that were making cups of tea.	Interview
Code	Housework management	Perceived benefits of WFH for managing housework, e.g. being able to do chores during the working day so that they are not overloaded at the end of the day, and are able to spend more time with children.	I like working from home. I get stuff done, and I actually mean personal stuff as well. And it sounds silly, but I can put the washing out. I can do put a wash on that I would have to find time to do after very long weeks at work.	Interview
Code	Personal wellbeing	Perceived benefits for personal wellbeing, including being able to dedicate more time to hobbies such as exercise and gardening during the working week.	So gains is definitely, I guess a lot of the flexibility. I can, you know, do exercise also doing some of the house jobs.	Interview
Code	Support spouses work	Perceived benefits of WFH and flexibility for one's	But the days can be quite unstructured	Interview

Code level	Name	Description	Example	Source
		<p>spouse's career e.g. flexibility means that the responsibility for care can be more evenly distributed.</p>	<p>for me to go an hour into the city and commute. It puts additional pressure on my wife. So I much rather be sat at home to allow her and me to work as a team. Better when things crop up. So the kids have got to go eye appointment during the day, she just couldn't do that during the day.</p>	

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