'I’m Home for the Kids': Contradictory Implications for Work–Life Balance of Teleworking Mothers

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This study explores the experience of time flexibility and its relationship to work–life balance among married female teleworkers with school-aged children. Drawing from a larger study of teleworkers from a Canadian financial corporation, 18 mothers employed in professional positions discussed work, leisure and their perceptions of work–life balance in in-depth interviews. Telework was viewed positively because flexible scheduling facilitated optimal time management. A key factor was the pervasiveness of caregiving, which could result in ongoing tensions and contradictions between the ethic of care and their employment responsibilities. The ideology of ‘intensive mothering’ meant that work schedules were closely tied to the rhythms of children’s school and leisure activities. The different temporal demands of motherhood and employment resulted in little opportunity for personal leisure. Time ‘saved’ from not having to commute to an office was reallocated to caregiving, housework or paid employment rather than to time for their self. The women also experienced a traditional gendered division of household labour and viewed telework as a helpful tool for combining their dual roles. Time flexibility enhanced their sense of balancing work and life and their perceived quality of life. At the same time, they did not question whether having the primary responsibility for caregiving while engaged in paid employment at home was fair or whether it was a form of exploitation.

Keywords: telework, work–life balance, intensive mothering, flexibility, ethic of care

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In recent decades work hours and work loads for paid employment have increased throughout the industrialized world (Guest, 2001; Schor, 1991) having particular repercussions for employed parents. As they cope with the demands of work and the family, parents of children and adolescents report feeling increased time pressure, a decreased sense of work–life balance, and an overall decline in satisfaction with life compared to previous years (Zuzanek, 2000, 2004). The current interest in work–life balance in both scholarly journal and popular press articles stems from a perception that excessive workplace demands have negative consequences for other important life spheres such as family and leisure. Work–life balance, therefore, has become an important issue in modern, post-industrial societies because of its link to concerns about the quality of life.

Many of the issues associated with heightened time pressure, work–life imbalance and decreased quality of life have arisen in response to recent gender- and age-related demographic changes in the workforce as well as a shift in many workplace cultures towards longer work hours, particularly among professionals (Crosbie and Moore, 2004). In Canada, General Social Surveys (GSS) from 1986 to 1998 indicate that among employed, married women with children under the age of 18 years, time spent on both paid employment and childcare has increased steadily. Additionally, in the 1998 GSS, mothers reported less satisfaction with their work–life balance than did fathers (Zuzanek, 2000). Changes in culturally defined ideologies of ‘good’ motherhood now imply that even greater amounts of time and energy should be directed toward the care of children and their leisure activities. The movement towards intensive parenting has no doubt contributed to increased feelings of time pressure and time stress among employed mothers. Consequently, much interest has been expressed by policymakers and employers in how alternative work arrangements might both improve work–life balance for employed mothers and enhance their quality of life.

Clark (2000) defines work–life balance as ‘satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict’ (p. 751). The dominant work–life balance discourse suggests that when work becomes all consuming, either in number of hours, timing of the work schedule or intensity of pace, it can lead to the neglect of important relationships and responsibilities, with negative implications for physical health, emotional and psychological wellbeing and overall quality of life. However, assessing work–life balance is challenging both conceptually and empirically. Objective definitions usually refer to hours of paid employment as an indicator of balance or imbalance. For example, a review of the 1993 Working Time Directive of the European Commission recommended that employees work no more than 48 hours per week and employers allow for flexible time scheduling to accommodate caregiving (Commission of the European Communities, 2004). Others believe that work–life balance is a subjective issue (Guest, 2001; Nippert-Eng, 1996) that requires consideration of other life
spheres, including personal time and space, care time and space and work time and space (Williams, 2001).

Recognition of caregiving and leisure (or personal time) may be particularly important for understanding temporal attributes of work–life balance for employed mothers since their experience of time is often multi-layered and complex. Temporal conditions inherent in family life and leisure that lend themselves to cyclical, task-based, polychronous time structures are intersected by the more linear, clock-oriented and rigid temporal framework of the workplace. In addition, as Caproni (2004) points out, maintaining a sense of temporal control in the workplace vis-à-vis the unpredictable nature of family life creates a complex and dialectical tension in the experience of time for employed mothers. The need to combine and cope with different temporal structures in work and household spheres means dealing with ‘that chaotic mass of fragments which is our present’ (Paolucci, 1996, p. 147).

Of all non-traditional work formats, policy makers and employees have most frequently suggested that telework (or home-based work) is an effective solution to juggling the demands of career and family (Swan and Cooper, 2005; Treasury Board of Canada, 1996). In particular, female teleworkers with families are a demographic group frequently cited as potential beneficiaries of this type of flexible work arrangement (Duxbury et al., 1998; Kornbluh et al., 2004; Swan and Cooper, 2005; Treasury Board of Canada, 1996). The increased spatial and temporal flexibility associated with telework, as opposed to work in a traditional office setting, is thought to allow better integration of workplace requirements and household needs (Musson and Tietze, 2004). On the other hand, women’s ‘ethic of care’ (Gilligan, 1982) may also play a role in the telework experiences and practices of employed mothers. That is, their feelings of responsibility to others, interconnectedness and nurturing behaviour in the context of marriage, family and social networks may underlie many of the values, actions, and attitudes that women adopt when combining home and the workplace. Given the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between temporal flexibility and work–life balance for female teleworkers with families, this study examines the experiences and perceptions of a group of employed mothers who conducted all or part of their paid work activities at home.

The telework potential

Duxbury and Higgins (2002) define telework as ‘work performed by individuals who are employed by an organization but who work at home or at a telecenter for some portion of their working time during regular business hours’ (p. 157). It differs from other home-based work such as farming, piecework, self-employment or homemaking through the teleworker’s affiliation with an employer and the use of telecommunications technology to
facilitate the performance of work activities (Sullivan, 2003). As a non-traditional work arrangement, an integral component of telework and the one deemed most ‘family friendly’ is spatial and temporal flexibility (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001).

While much research has addressed the pros and cons of teleworking from an economic and environmental vantage point (see Duxbury and Higgins, 2002), there are fewer studies of teleworkers that explore the relationship of telework, work–life balance and quality of life. In terms of its contribution to work–life balance, temporal flexibility would seem to provide an ideal solution for time-pressured employees with families. Tremblay (2003) found that both men and women viewed telework as an attractive form of non-standard work because it allowed them ‘to reduce their travel time, to be at home later in the morning and earlier in the evening, and thus to achieve a better balance between work and family responsibilities’ (p. 479). Other research on telework, however, has yielded conflicting results because different problems may arise when the home becomes the workplace. For example, some workers find themselves unable to escape the constant demands of work and even experience a heightened sense of work-related imbalance in their lives (Scott-Dixon, 2004; Steward, 2000; Vittgerso et al., 2003). Relatively little research has been conducted on the issues of women’s care-giving roles and imperatives and women’s personal time or leisure. Moreover, the question of two or more different life spheres colliding, overlapping and impacting upon an individual because of the different meanings, cultures and temporal rhythms inherent in each domain also deserves further attention.

Historically, paid and unpaid work often co-existed in the home. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, however, most paid work became spatially separated from household production, involving different groups of people and becoming associated with different behavioural expectations (Clark, 2000). As distinct domains, paid production at work and unpaid production in the household have acquired different temporal values and rhythms. According to Adam (1995), time devoted to paid employment has been commodified, decontextualized and disembodied. Conversely, household time is grounded in recurring rhythms and patterns of activities (Daly, 1996) that are often cyclical rather than linear, task-based instead of clock-based, and embedded in meaning instead of being decontextualized (Tietze and Musson, 2003). By reintroducing paid employment into the home, the worker must contend with tensions between simultaneous, complex and sometimes competing time structures. Therefore, the opportunity that the flexible time structure of telework allows for making temporal decisions according to an individual’s work, care and personal priorities may help to facilitate their resolution of diverse, concurrent temporal experiences.

Flexibility covers both the use of time and the way in which the world is experienced (Paolucci, 1996). The meaning and use of flexible time, therefore, may be different for women and men because of the gendered experience of
time. This is reflected in the idea of ‘masculine’ time as linear, monochronic or industrial time and ‘feminine’ time as cyclical, polychronic or domestic time (Daly, 1996; Davies, 1990; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). Using Nippert-Eng’s (1996) description of a continuum of work–family boundaries, the gendered experience of time suggests that women who adopt a polychronous time structure are more likely be integrators whereas men, who are more monochronic in their use of time, fall towards the segmentator end of the continuum. Other qualities may also come into play. For example, life style, family dynamics and personality characteristics may be important determinants of where or whether work–life boundaries are drawn in a telework employment arrangement. These attributes play a role in whether the integration of work and family through flexible time structuring has a positive or negative effect on perceived work–life balance.

Even though several authors have explored the intersection of work–family balance and its relationship to quality of life among women who telework (Clark, 2000; Crosbie and Moore, 2004; Diamond, 2002; Hill et al., 2003; Musson and Tietze, 2004; Vittgerso et al., 2003), the lack of attention to personal time may reveal a set of culturally defined gender role and lifecycle expectations that leave little room for leisure pursuits. In a study of professional female teleworkers, Shaw et al. (2003) reported that women viewed telework positively because they were better able to manage work and family responsibilities. Nonetheless, flexibility was not used to accommodate personal leisure. Musson and Tietze (2004) found similar results among female teleworkers. Because work tended to be more focused and uninterrupted at home, tasks could be accomplished in a shorter period of time. Similar to the finding in Kay’s (1998) study, women often used the ‘time saved’ for other domestic activities, even though men were more likely to pursue personal leisure or more paid work.

One of the reasons why emphasis is placed on the balance between paid work and family care-giving, and personal leisure is often ignored by women teleworkers may be that this reflects changed ideologies of motherhood. Evolving childrearing practices in North America tend to treat children as ‘sacred’ (Hays, 1996) so that parents’ lives are subordinated to children’s needs (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Arendell (2001) reported that the movement toward more structured, purposive childhoods has altered the nature of women’s traditional maternal care and increased their workload through added activities such as planning, scheduling, co-ordinating and monitoring children’s ‘free’ time. While both husband and wife in dual-earner couples in her study were committed to facilitating this structured approach to child-rearing, women were expected to assume the responsibility for carrying it out. In terms of household and family labour, it has become ‘a new veneer on the conventional gender-based division’ (Arendell, 2001, p. 195), leaving mothers little time for their own ‘needs, identities, and activities’ (2001, p. 187).
The loss of self-identity combined with a total devotion to children, described as ‘intensive mothering’ (Hays, 1996), is explored further by Warner (2005) who labels it the ‘new problem that has no name’ or ‘the Mommy Mystique’ (Warner, 2005, p. 13). In this approach mothers are expected to assume total responsibility for providing children with a ‘good’ childhood, constantly bearing in mind their children’s present happiness and potential future accomplishments. In contrast to Weber’s 19th century description of capitalist society as an ‘iron cage’, feminist theorist Pam Blake (personal communication, 2000) compares the situation of modern mothers to being in a ‘hamster cage’:

In this commercially manufactured wire cage ... the exercise wheel runs incessantly. Its pace can sometimes be slowed. But for the most part, the wheel gains steadily increasing momentum, even to the point of acquiring a nearly independent motion. The cultural and economic forces moving the spinning wheel of contemporary family life are powerful. (personal correspondence, quoted in Arendell, 2001, p. 197)

The increased time mothers spend in caring for children is noted in Canada’s 1998 GSS (Zuzanek, 2000) and reflects this approach to childrearing. This changing ideology may also have contributed to the heightened sense of time pressure and work–life imbalance among employed mothers, as indicated in Zuzanek’s (2000) report on the effects of time pressure on parent–child relationships. Considering the challenges of reconciling divergent temporal realities of work, caregiving and time for oneself, this is hardly a surprising outcome, particularly in light of new cultural standards for good motherhood.

Given the different temporal experiences and tendencies to integrate or separate work and family, telework may also have implications for the reproduction of traditional gender roles. That is, telework may be family friendly, ‘but it is not necessarily gender-equitable in its operation and effects’ (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001, p. 142). Teleworking fathers may be able to ‘help out’ more with domestic labour, particularly childcare (Diamond, 2002), but studies have found no evident change in the gendered division of labour. In fact, temporal flexibility may facilitate the reproduction of these roles even though at least some women teleworkers have reported that temporal flexibility improves their lives by allowing them to more easily combine roles, decrease time pressure and attain a better work–life balance (Diamond, 2002; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). Temporal flexibility, it seems, is highly compatible with and supportive of the ethic of care. Compared to working in a traditional, temporally restrictive office environment, telework schedules may be adjusted, altered and even fragmented to more adequately address their own expectations of caregiving and nurturing and their need to interconnect with others.

In response to different experiences and domestic expectations of female teleworkers, Sullivan and Lewis (2001) explored both the ‘exploitation’ and
'new opportunities' models of telework in their research. Based on work by Silver (1993) and Haddon and Silverstone (1993), the ‘exploitation model’ posits that telework perpetuates ‘the exploitation of women in terms of both paid work and the domestic burden of responsibility’ (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001, p. 124). Thus, flexible hours are seen as allowing women to assume total domestic responsibility, rather than forcing employers or legislators to address childcare and other social issues. In Sullivan and Lewis’ (2001) study, though, female teleworkers embraced the ‘new opportunities model’, constructing telework as an attractive option enabling them to fulfil their domestic and work obligations. This suggests that both the experience and conceptualization of flexible work is important for understanding quality of life issues.

In this study we explore how married female teleworkers living with their spouse and school-aged children perceive time flexibility as affecting their work–life balance. Through socialization and reproduction, women are attuned to the split between ‘domestic’ time as mothers, and ‘industrial’ time as employees (Davies, 1990). The challenge may be for them to reconcile these often competing and contradictory experiences of time within the cultural ideology of intensive mothering.

This research seeks to address the following three questions:

1. To what extent do mothers who are teleworkers experience temporal flexibility in their lives because they work at home?
2. How do they respond to this flexibility in terms of their domestic roles, employment roles and their personal time?
3. Do they perceive that this increased flexibility contributes to an improvement in their work–life balance and if so, in what ways?

The telework study

This research is part of a more comprehensive study undertaken from 2000–2005 of the implications of telework for Canadian workers, their families and communities. An integral component of the study was exploring the relationship of telework, leisure and wellbeing. The sample for this article consisted of 18 mothers with school-age children (six to 18-years old) drawn from a larger sample of 74 teleworkers who worked for a large financial firm from various locations across Canada.

The participants were recruited in one of three ways: through a list of teleworkers provided by managers; by a teleconference arranged by the employer and attended by potential participants; and through ‘snowball’ contacts provided by study participants. All potential participants were contacted by electronic communication and provided with an outline of the study. They were invited to complete an online questionnaire about their
background and experiences with and attitudes towards telework. Once this had been submitted, those wanting to participate further were contacted again and asked to record their time use and travel patterns over a one-week period using an electronic activity diary. A semi-structured interview followed (by telephone or in person) and included themes of work–life integration, travel, home–work spaces and general topics such as telework patterns, arrangements and their overall subjective assessment of their telework experience.

The information provided by participants was kept strictly confidential, with the understanding that only summary findings would be shared with their employer. For this study, only the data from the interviews are used because they allow a deeper focus on the participants’ perceptions, behaviour and experiences of telework. The names given in this analysis are pseudonyms.

All of the women in this sample were married and living with a spouse and children. While six of the women also had a preschool child between the ages of two to five-years old, none of them had an infant under the age of two. There were almost equal numbers of six to 11-year olds and 12 to 18-year olds among the other children. Thirteen women had two children each, two had three children and two had one child. The remaining participant had five children. Half of the women were in their thirties and the others were in their forties. The participants were a highly educated group; two-thirds had a university degree, three held post-graduate degrees and the remaining three had a college diploma. For all but three women, their household income exceeded $100,000 CAD annually. Most were employed in professional, technical and administrative roles in the case-study firm.

There were two part-time workers and the others worked full-time. In this company, a full-time employee was expected to work 37.5 hours per week. All the full-time workers exceeded that amount, with the number of hours ranging from 38 to 50 per week. One of the part-time workers belonged to the same division as the full-time participants. She worked long part-time hours of four days, or 30 hours per week. The other worked two days per week in a different department.

The interviews were semi-structured and took from 60 to 90 minutes to complete. The interview guide focused on issues related to the overall telework experience and the impact of telework on work–life balance. The participants were encouraged to discuss these issues in terms of their own experiences and perceptions, including their everyday life activities and how they managed and felt about their work time, family time and personal time. All the interviews were taped and then transcribed. A qualitative analysis was used to discover the participants’ interpretations and meanings of their experiences and processes related to flexible scheduling, parenting and work–life balance. All interview transcripts were coded with NVivo software, first using open coding to reflect participants’ experiences and thoughts about
telework. From the many open codes, axial and selective coding was employed to establish overriding themes, relationships and patterns using grounded theory methodology outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Throughout the coding, a constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to compare categories both within and between interviews, between full-time and part-time workers, and between mothers of younger children and mothers of adolescents.

Reflexive memos were used to document and assist in the development of themes and conceptual understanding. The reflexive process was especially valuable in developing an appreciation of the deeper meanings of temporal flexibility for the women, as their responsibilities in different life domains intruded upon one another. The nature of these colliding, competing and overlapping temporal spheres led to other questions about who really controls the women’s time — the company, the family, or the worker herself. We asked how often the worker felt pulled in different directions by the linear temporal demands of the employer (e.g., by scheduling appointments, meeting clients and submitting ‘billable hours’), the sometimes unpredictable temporal rhythm of caregiving responsibilities, as well as the predictable rhythms of children’s school hours and vacations that rarely matched their own. Other issues then became pressing. For instance, to what extent was their perceived control of time related to their quality of life? The depth, extent and range of activities and feelings relating to the ethic of care became evident too. The nurturing and caregiving one would expect to find in relation to home and family extended to multiple social networks involving neighbours, children’s friends, co-workers and, frequently, clients. This led to greater reflection of the pervasiveness of the ethic of care as it influences attitudes, choices and the perception of work–life balance for women.

**Implications of temporal flexibility for work–life balance**

Three sub-themes emerged from the interviews including perceptions of temporal flexibility and control, the pervasiveness of caregiving and accepting the lack of personal time. These were linked by the overarching theme of coping with the contradictions between control and care. The three sub-themes will be outlined first, followed by a discussion of the dominant issue of temporal contradictions that helps to explain how these themes connect.

**Perceptions of temporal flexibility and control**

I really like the idea that I can control my own time. (Cathy)

Throughout the analyses, it was apparent that most teleworkers perceived time flexibility in an overwhelmingly positive light because it gave them a
sense of control over time. They could alter their work schedule to suit their needs, the needs of their family, and those of their clients. In short, flexibility meant that they were able to create a work schedule that functioned for them. As one mother pointed out:

I know my schedule well in advance because I make my own schedule too … for example, today I know I’m not going anywhere, so I could have slept in a little bit, like until I had to take my son to the babysitter’s and not showered or anything and get a little extra sleep if I wanted to — just depending on how my day is going. (Ruth)

She later continues:

I have flexibility in what I do. I’m not set to any certain hours that I work. I have to bill so much time, so if I work extra hard on Monday and bill all my time for the week then I could really goof off for the rest of the week. I wouldn’t do that, but in theory that’s what you could do as long as you are meeting your deadlines and your timeframes. (Ruth)

Another described the best aspect of her home office as ‘the flexibility of using my time to fit my schedule’ (Eileen). A flexible schedule gave teleworkers the option of incorporating personal appointments and errands into their day at convenient times.

Most often, however, a flexible schedule was viewed as an integral component in their ability to manage the demands of a busy family life. In fact, many women considered it essential because they felt that they were better able to organize their work schedule to allow for family commitments and responsibilities, thereby creating a perception of temporal control. Several seemed to appreciate not having to consult managers when personal appointments for family members had to be accommodated within the workday:

It’s just much nicer not having to ask; especially when you have young kids and have to go to the dentist, you don’t need to take a full day off for that. (Sandra)

Similarly, no colleagues were there to pass judgment on their actions. This is clearly reflected in the following comment by Michelle, the mother of one school-age and one preschool child who mentions

getting the children early if I want to or just to be able to go out for breakfast. And although I do the work I don’t feel like I have someone looking over my shoulder as I walk out the door or come in at 9:30 instead of 8.

Despite the positive assessment of flexibility, most adhered to a fairly rigid, traditional time frame and worked at an intensive pace. Nancy’s routine was fairly typical:
The days I’m in the office, it’s straight time. I usually arrive at my desk at 7 and I work until 4 or 5 and I don’t take lunch. I work through my lunch because I just find there is so much to do.

An early start to the day, missing meals or eating at their desk was not uncommon.

I got up at 6, worked 6 to 7, got the kids up 7 to 8 and was back at work at 8. I worked through the day and kept working after the kids got home from school. I’d eat at my desk and sometimes go back for another hour after. (Cathy)

I generally eat my breakfast at my desk. I usually work those hours straight through during the busier times, and when I have work that I know I am not going to get done during my workday, I wake up early. Sometimes in the summer I have been at work at 5 o’clock in the morning. (Eileen)

Many of the women stressed the importance of following a routine. They believed it was essential in managing their daily workload:

I have a routine … I think that people just have to set a routine. I think that is important so that you don’t let things get away on you. (Loretta)

Interruptions to the routine could lead to frustration, particularly during the morning household rush. Zlata, the mother of two younger children, who preferred to work during the morning commented:

The only part of that routine I’m responsible for is walking them to the bus in the morning. And that is my best, from 6 to 10 are my best hours of the day. So there are times when my husband is not sure what is going on, or the kids need something where they are down in the office bugging me in the time when I make all my calls.

For some, flexibility facilitated working extra hours, usually in response to a heavier workload. Of this group, most had older children, preferred working in the evenings to the weekends, and tried not to let work at this time interfere with family responsibilities. Charlotte, a mother of two teenagers, said:

Usually when I work in the evenings, it’s because they are off doing whatever. Sometimes they’re at home but they’re watching some stupid teenager movie that I don’t want to view or whatever and I have nothing else to do, so I’ll work. Sometimes that is when I get a lot done. It’s not unusual for me to work until midnight or so.

Most expressed a definite preference to having weekends free and, if that was not feasible, they tried to have at least one day on the weekend that did not involve paid employment. As this mother’s comments indicated, it was not always possible:
I try, depending on caseload demands, I try to avoid Sundays, but then what I usually end up doing is working Saturday morning and Sunday morning. So that’s where it spills over to almost 7 days a week sometimes. (Sandra)

Others experienced similar problems trying to control the number of hours spent working. One teleworker commented: ‘It’s hard today to work; I don’t know how people do it in 37 (hours per week)’ (Angela). The need for self-discipline and efficiency in the way they managed their time was often mentioned.

The comments indicate that temporal flexibility was a highly valued feature of telework among mothers of school-aged children, although it was apparent that it may have indirectly contributed to increasing these women’s unpaid workload. Nevertheless, with the hours of work required by their employer and the amount of time necessary to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities, it would seem that any autonomy over the timing of these tasks was welcomed. Dealing with interruptions to their schedule to accommodate children’s school and leisure activities revealed much about a strong internalization of the ethic of care and the primacy of caregiving for teleworking mothers.

The pervasiveness of caregiving

Well then you have your babies, you see, you make life choices. (Sandra)

Creating their own schedules led to different options but, for most of the women, very high priority was given to their children’s daily routines and recreational activities, and the rhythm of the school year. In general, the women expressed very positive feelings about being able to schedule their workday according to the needs of their children, as the following women indicate:

Working from home improved my ability to be there for my kids. (Cathy)

I find it’s more rushed, but I’m home for the kids. (Nancy)

Some mothers of younger children organized their workday in order to volunteer at school, although, as Carol’s comment clearly reflects, such volunteering was often challenging:

I do take time out to go every other week to my son’s school and read there for an hour. But, I have to come into work from 9 to 10, leave at 10 to be there at 10.15, and then read for the hour. I don’t get back really until 11.45, so that’s very rushed.

The mothers of adolescents were often very involved in supporting their extracurricular activities, even when they intruded on their established work
routine. One mother described how participating in a car pool for her daughter’s gymnastic classes affected her workday:

[other] parents were asking me to drive them because they couldn’t get home early enough. So on those days I had to condition myself to close my office, absolutely close it by 4.30 or sometimes even 4.00 ... and I found that was rushed. (Angela)

For many, providing transportation was a time-consuming daily commitment, as Zlata describes:

I drive the kids to all their activities and to school. I actually go into the school once a week to volunteer. If I’m going into the school, I’ll drive them there.

Considering the amount of time involved and responsibility for driving children, Loretta summed up her role in the following way, ‘Well, you know, I’m the chauffer and everything’.

Some women found this led to feelings of frustration and, occasionally, to difficulties in completing their work. Nancy, a part-time worker, felt considerable time pressure:

I’m at the school three times a day to pick them up and drop them off and so on and so forth. And they have extra activities, like everyone else I guess. With only those two hours, I find it very hard to produce stuff. You still have to produce.

It was not always easy or desirable to stop work at a certain time in order to care for children. Again, Nancy spoke about how her son’s school schedule fragmented her workday:

Well, I do have trouble shutting it off, but I don’t have a choice because I have to go pick him up. I don’t have an option. And I’ve been in conversations, where I’ve said, ‘You know what? I have to leave’. And I’ll often come back and call people back, answer the e-mails, or finish whatever I was doing.

Likewise, older children returning from school before the workday was finished could disrupt the women’s work routines. Angela said, ‘They come home at 3.30 or 3.45 and they expect that I just drop everything because I’m here.’ Later in the interview, however, she expressed feelings of guilt because she did not devote more time to her children when they came home from school.

Decisions to alter their work schedule were made according to the mother’s perception of the level of importance of their children’s needs. Sometimes the mothers attempted to enlist the help of the children’s father. For example, Linda describes one scenario:
If I’m working away and get interrupted by one of my kids, it would depend on what they want, what they want help with, or what it is.... There will be times when I say, ‘I’m almost finished with this. I need another half hour. I will come and see you’, or if it’s something ... ‘go ask your father. He’s sitting right there beside you’.

School hours, professional development days (PD days), March Break and summer vacations had a major influence over work time. Many started their workday as soon as children departed for or had been driven to school. If they began earlier, it was because their children were old enough to get themselves ready in the morning or another family member could care for them. Often the women would take a day off for school PD days or schedule their vacation during March Break. The clear assumption was that childcare was the mother’s responsibility. Many found it challenging to work during the summer when children had an extended vacation. Loretta, a mother of three, commented:

I guess I’m lucky because for 10 months of the year they are away at school and they are older so the noise isn’t too bad really.

Not only did the household noise level increase in summer, affecting their ability to focus on work, mothers of older children found they were driving them more frequently during the course of the workday to activities or social engagements than they would at other times of the year.

Being available for a sick child was considered extremely important. There was an assumption that mothers were also the primary caregivers for sick children. Flexible scheduling allowed them to integrate work and caregiving relatively easily, as these comments illustrate:

If they’re sick, I often work around them. If they sleep, I’ll work. Or I might just work the afternoon instead of the morning, or whatever. (Nancy)

If my son is sick, I don’t have to call in sick. I can still be at home and I can still get some work done. (Ruth)

A few of the women described themselves as being part of the ‘sandwich generation’, whose additional caregiving responsibilities for elderly parents were helped by their flexible arrangements. Others appreciated being able to care for pets during the day. The needs of others were always given high priority in determining work schedules as mothers assumed primary responsibility for caregiving. Their own needs, however, did not feature prominently. Flexible scheduling meant accommodating care and work time, with little consideration or recognition of the need for personal time and leisure that might contribute to their quality of life.

Accepting the lack of personal time

When you have young kids your life is just kind of devoted to them. (Eileen)
Given the women’s focus on family and children, it is not surprising that the flexibility experienced was rarely used for leisure or other forms of personal time. Time constraints meant that there was often little choice in personal leisure. While some mothers engaged in social activities, physical activity, or hobbies, many simply watched television to relax. Free time was often spent with family. One mother viewed the evening meal time as her leisure:

I do get relaxation time. Even things like making dinner and that sort of thing. And it’s usually time spent with the family. My husband and I will barbecue outside and the kids will be around and we’ll talk about school or whatever. (Charlotte)

Some expressed a desire for more personal time. Nevertheless, as the parent responsible for scheduling, arranging and providing transportation for children’s activities, the time commitment meant that it was seldom possible as this mother says:

I would love to have (my husband) home early on Thursday so I can just go away for a half hour by myself. But that doesn’t seem to happen. And my kids are busy. My son is in two activities and my other son is into a couple. (Nancy).

Most seemed to accept that a lack of personal time was part of being an employed mother with primary responsibility for children and the home. Susan, the mother of one teenager, stated:

The reality is when you are a working mother there is not much time for anything but work. You still have to do your housework; if you are looking for a really active social life you likely shouldn’t either work or have kids. It’s hard to have it all.

Comments from many of the women indicated that children’s leisure activities were given a higher priority than their own:

Your leisure patterns are dictated by where you are on your life scale. And I think for example, if the kids had a soccer game on Wednesday night, you’d stop everything and go to that soccer game. (Linda)

When asked if their schedule allowed enough time for leisure, these mothers replied:

I would say that if it doesn’t, it’s not because of work. It’s more because of what my kids are doing. (Betty)

My kids are too hungry for [my attention] to go out and have a little 15 minute walk. They’d say, ‘get back here’. (Angela)
Few women pursued their own leisure on regular basis. Rather, leisure tended to occur sporadically and on a more informal basis once their caregiving and work responsibilities had been fulfilled. Still, some recognized that personal leisure was important to their wellbeing. As Linda commented, ‘I just feel better when I’ve done something for me and I don’t begrudge all the other stuff that I do for everyone else’.

Even so, most mothers opted to use flexible scheduling to accommodate employment and caregiving responsibilities ahead of personal time or leisure. It is questionable then, whether telework does, in fact, contribute to a greater or lesser extent to work–life balance when time for the self receives so little priority. By placing their own needs last in the hierarchy of time allocation, contradictions surface between the element of control and the deeply ingrained ethic of care.

**Coping with the contradictions between control and care**

I think I’m happy. I mean, I think like any working mother, I feel stretched. (Ellen)

Taken together, the first three themes indicate the contradictions between caregiving and perceived sense of temporal control. In general the mothers led busy lives but expressed the belief that telework helped them to achieve a sense of balance because of flexible scheduling. They could work while their children were at school, be at home when they returned home, provide transportation to school and activities and care for their children when they were ill. They took advantage of breaks and lunches to integrate housework into their routine, they scheduled personal appointments at more convenient times and they even took better care of family pets — all of which gave them a greater sense of control over their schedule and work–life balance, as they defined it. As this mother observed, ‘I’d say it makes it easier to do the things you always did’ (Sandra).

Many expressed satisfaction with telework and valued the flexibility it provided, which is clearly reflected in these comments:

I feel lucky for sure. (Loretta)

Like I said, I wouldn’t give it up. (Tina)

It is a privilege to work from home. (Ellen)

It’s like a cult; once you join you never want to leave. (Pam)

Yet, it was evident that flexible scheduling might have contributed to the sense of time pressure because they often worked more intensively or assumed additional child-related responsibilities. Eileen’s workday provides an excellent illustration of non-stop activity:

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I have heard [my husband] say to other people, ‘It’s so nice that she works from home. She’s really on top of things; she can get so much [housework] done working from home’. And I feel like saying, ‘Well that’s just because I am efficient and organized, and that means I go go go’. I don’t take a break and just sit and relax. At lunch time, others enjoy lunch with their friends or read a book at lunch. I never do that. From the time my kids are on the bus, I am either working — which is my actual job — or I am picking up stuff around the house.

Nancy was unusual in that she recognized the tension between flexibility and caregiving, preferring the more leisurely pace of her previous work life at the office, but still choosing to telework to better accommodate her children’s needs:

It was much more leisurely [at the office]. I had time to do the work I needed to get done. I had more time to myself in terms of if I wanted to get a coffee, or if I wanted to take a lunch that option was there … I feel it’s more difficult working from home. I find it’s more rushed, but I’m home for the kids.

Difficulties were sometimes acknowledged, but they were also accepted as part of the ongoing ‘balancing act’ between work and family. Still, these mothers did not appear to question their role as primary caregiver or the unequal division of household labour, which usually followed traditional gender patterns:

My husband doesn’t do anything at home. Great guy, but he has a very demanding job, very busy. (Charlotte)

Although many mothers recognized the inequality, they seemed to accept it as inevitable or something that they could not change:

I think moms do a lot more parenting even now than fathers do and it’s never going to be 50–50 split. (Eileen)

Some felt this had been exacerbated by working from home:

He has expectations of me that would never have been there had I not been at home. (Zlata)

Others detected no change in either expectations or sharing of domestic activities:

My husband never helped anyways. Nobody ever helped, so nothing changed. (Susan)

Not all of the teleworkers were in this situation. Some women mentioned their husbands who ‘helped out’ with domestic tasks ranging from laundry to childcare. Nonetheless, the bulk of the responsibility for caregiving rested
firmly with the mother and telework was generally constructed as a means of making this situation more manageable. Rather than question the social norms of intensive mothering or how flexible scheduling might lead to assuming a heavier total workload, almost all the teleworkers were grateful for the opportunities telework afforded them in accommodating their paid and unpaid work, particularly the needs of their children.

Most of the women believed that flexibility gave them control over their time. In fact, what actually seemed to control their time were the schedules and routines of other family members, the work requirements of their employer and their expectations of themselves as mothers and employees. Even though telework allowed them to schedule their work according to the most pressing priorities, it forced them to integrate work and home responsibilities. As conscientious employees, the requirement to work a certain number of billable hours was always on their mind. Likewise, nurturing and being the parent primarily responsible for the children meant that difficult decisions sometimes had to be made. This could result in highly fragmented schedules where the women frequently moved between the temporal realities of work and home. Personal time was rarely seen as a priority. The tensions arising between the ‘ethic of care’ and their own work responsibilities could result in feelings of frustration and guilt. With so much time devoted to employment and caregiving, little or no time remained for personal leisure. The spheres of work–life balance were weighted heavily towards work and family, with only a small portion allotted to leisure. Nevertheless, there was a perception that telework improved their overall quality of life.

Discussion

The women in this study viewed telework and temporal flexibility in a very favourable light since they believed it allowed them to manage better not only the demands of work and family, but also the different temporal dimensions of each sphere. In that sense, managing or taking control of their everyday lives was seen to contribute positively to their quality of life, even though they had little personal time or opportunity for individual leisure. Still, they did not question the assumption that they were primarily responsible for their home and family and were willing to go to great lengths to ensure that both work and children received the attention they felt they deserved. This study, therefore, supports the findings of Sullivan and Lewis (2001), where ‘new opportunities’ and ‘exploitation’ models often go hand in hand. The women organized their workday to match school hours whenever possible. If they had to stop when school was finished because of caregiving responsibilities, they would continue working later in the evening after children had gone to bed or on the weekend to complete their required hours. This demonstrates the intersection of cyclical time of the household and linear time of the
The mothers usually reconciled their different temporal realities in one of two ways: either their work hours became fragmented or they worked at a more intense pace. From this vantage point, it would appear that flexible scheduling may perpetuate women’s traditional roles and telework can be seen as exploitive. From the women’s point of view, however, this remained largely unrecognized and telework was highly valued because the increased control over their time allowed them to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities.

While they tried to structure their schedule to maintain temporal segmentation between paid employment and caregiving, it was not unusual for these women to integrate household tasks such as laundry, pet care, or tidying into the daily routine that could be accomplished during a brief ‘work break’. Instead of expressing resentment at using this time for domestic activities, they believed that this enhanced their efficiency — another example of the ‘new opportunities’ construction of telework. Telework was perceived as being ‘family friendly’ by the mothers but, as suggested by other research (Diamond, 2002; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001), it was not gender equitable, since it helped to reproduce an unequal division of labour and created optimal temporal conditions for women to work even harder by facilitating opportunities for more caregiving.

Only one participant challenged the ‘new opportunities’ assumption that permeated the other interviews. This would suggest that most women accepted a traditional gendered division of household labour, which was more easily supported by telework. Rather than resisting the number of hours and intense pace required to perform both paid labour and unpaid household production, they organized their time to accommodate the routines and expectations of others, thereby reproducing patterns of activity that contributed to their own exploitation. This was particularly evident when dealing with interruptions. While they valued routine in their workday, it seemed that there was an expectation that the temporal flexibility inherent in telework would be used to accommodate the needs of family members and others in the women’s network of caring responsibilities, and that these should be given a high priority. Personal time was sacrificed to meet employment responsibilities, or to the demands of children’s needs, school schedules and leisure activities.

The participants in this study were all primary parents who demonstrated an ‘intensive mothering’ approach to childrearing. They were involved with child-centred activities during the workday, such as car-pooling, volunteering in the classroom, or driving children back and forth to school. They were also responsible for organizing the activities, family scheduling and transportation. They found it extremely important to be as accessible as possible to their children, even though it often interfered with the rhythm and routine of their workday. This created contradictions between their dual roles that many of the teleworkers largely failed to recognize. Some expressed feelings of guilt.
when they could not spend more time with their children while at home, but they also shared frustrations about interruptions to their workday and their inability to accomplish work due to the demands of parenting.

Rarely were these frustrations directed towards their children, although occasionally some desire was expressed that husband might ‘help out’ more. Only one of the mothers mentioned her dissatisfaction with the employer-imposed telework arrangement, which she recognized as sometimes impeding the completion of her work-related tasks. On the other hand, the same woman had made a decision to continue teleworking so she could be physically present for her children, even though it meant that she had to accept a less than ideal work situation in terms of trying to integrate the rhythms of work and the household. She also felt the loss of the more leisurely pace of the office, where there was time, at least, to take a work break without trying to combine household and domestic activities.

Although the desire for more personal time was expressed by many mothers, in their choice of leisure pursuits most mentioned unstructured activities such as watching television, or pockets of time that provided leisurely moments during regular domestic routines such as cooking supper, or socializing with family members. The way they allocated their time would seem to indicate that their own leisure did not occupy a high priority at this point in their lives. Additionally, like Kay’s (1998) professional mothers, their sense of entitlement to leisure was not strong enough for it to take precedence over other demands on their time and so they accepted the imbalance or felt powerless to address it.

Because these middle-class women were subject to the cultural norms of intensive mothering, it appeared that they viewed their time commitments to children as part of an essential process in optimally enhancing their children’s development, potentialities and lives. They did not seem to question the social norms or pressures that may have led them to believe that it was necessary to give such a high priority to their children’s interests, school experiences and leisure activities. Furthermore, they accepted that their own lack of leisure was an outcome of one stage in their life cycle and employment status. Blake’s societal ‘hamster cage’ is an appropriate metaphor. These mothers often seemed caught up on an exercise wheel that was spinning with its own momentum, propelled by social and cultural forces beyond their control. Flexible scheduling led to perceived greater control, but also created an optimal situation for the wheel to continue turning at an even more accelerated pace.

**Conclusion**

Temporal autonomy and the perception that they controlled their schedule served to reduce feelings of time pressure for most of these mothers and they
believed that telework had made a positive contribution to their quality of life. Therefore, telework would appear to be a pragmatic choice, although perhaps not optimal in terms of their work–life balance. In addition, because they embraced an intensive motherhood model and traditional gender role orientation, both caregiving and work were dominant and time for themselves did not appear to be an important factor in the work–life balance equation. The spheres of work and care time greatly outweighed personal time, even though personal leisure was valued by at least some of the women.

This imbalance was also noted in previous research by Brannen (2005) who commented, ‘It is unwise to assume that giving people more control over their lives necessarily leads to an improvement in the quality of their lives’ (pp. 127–8). It may allow them to work longer, at a more intense pace, and integrate their caregiving responsibilities, but flexible scheduling did not appear to facilitate time for the self in the work–life balance equation. Like the teleworkers in Brannen’s study, these mothers had a somewhat illusory perception of temporal autonomy. They believed that the flexibility of telework which allowed them to optimally schedule their day meant that they were in control. They did not appear to acknowledge the external control imposed by the employer, their family or social norms of intensive mothering, or a combination of all three. Rather, for the most part, the exploitation or subjugation remained hidden, unrecognized and unchallenged. It is worth questioning, therefore, whether telework represents a blind spot for policymakers who assume that women’s work–life balance and quality of life will be improved when paid and unpaid labour are combined in the home, particularly for mothers with caregiving responsibilities.

The findings from this study lead to a number of questions that should be explored further as more employers begin to offer telework opportunities. For instance, what is the experience of mothers with preschool children who telework? Fathers, too, need to be considered because of their different experience of time and parenting. Mothers who have non-standard work schedules, compressed work weeks or are self-employed face different challenges and may also have a different experience of leisure than those with traditional work arrangements. In what ways might their quality of life be affected when schedules are not synchronized with other family members? In addition, further exploration of the new gendered work of intensive mothering and structuring childhood is needed. There needs to be greater recognition of the extensive time commitment related to the ideology of intensive mothering along with the ramifications for work–life balance for women. Finally, issues related to how different temporal spheres of living influence one another, such as technology’s affect on the acceleration of social rhythms (Paolucci, 1996), changing employment models and the intensification of parenthood (Warner, 2005) should be considered, as they relate to women’s quality of life. Ultimately, the question that needs to be posed is whether the adoption of new work forms is sufficient, in light of changing approaches to parenting, to
diffuse or decrease time pressure for employed mothers in order to enhance their quality of life.

References


