

Women's Experiences Navigating Paid Work and Caregiving During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, many women lost their jobs or chose to leave the workforce because of increased caregiving demands. Of women who remained employed, many faced increased complexity in negotiating their roles as employees and caregivers. On the basis of existing theory and research on the impact of women's caregiving responsibilities on their careers, we developed a model of the relationships among women's caregiving hours for children and adults, work-family and family-work conflict, perceived social support, and career satisfaction during the pandemic. We collected data from 475 university staff members and tested our model using a path analysis. Results suggested that caregiving hours for children directly influenced work-family and family-work conflict and that social support partially mediated the relationship between family-work conflict and career satisfaction. We discuss how counselors might best work with women who are navigating multiple life roles during a period of family, community, and global challenges.

Keywords: women, career satisfaction, caregiving, work-life balance, COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on women in the workforce. In April 2020, one month into pandemic-related shutdowns, the unemployment rate for women in the United States was 15.5% (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2020b). One year later, women's unemployment had dropped to 5.6% (BLS, 2021). However, the workforce participation rate for women in April 2021 was only 57.2%, equaling what it had been in October 1988 (Ewing-Nelson & Tucker, 2021).

Women whose jobs were spared during the pandemic faced other challenges. Typically bearing responsibility for the majority of household and caregiving tasks (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019), many women struggled to maintain their level of occupational productivity. In an analysis of articles published on COVID-19 in the medical field, Andersen et al. (2020) found that, compared with the same journals in 2019, there were 19% fewer articles with female first authors in March and April 2020. Feng and Savani (2020) gathered data on personal and professional productivity from 286 Americans working full-time from home during in the early days of the pandemic lockdown. Female respondents

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reported spending an average of 2.56 more hours per day on housework during the pandemic while also reporting a significant decrease in work productivity. In short, the pandemic brought new attention to the long-standing difficulties many women face balancing their responsibilities at home and at work. The purpose of this study was to explore relationships among caregiving roles, work-life balance, perceived social support, and career satisfaction for working women during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ecological model of career counseling (Cook et al., 2002) provides practitioners and researchers a useful framework for conceptualizing the impact of a woman's environment on her career decision-making. Based on Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory, this model offers a systems perspective on career development that acknowledges the many roles women hold, including roles within their families. Cook et al. (2002), the model's creators, identified and refuted common biases within career development, including that paid work is a person's most meaningful contribution to society, that paid work must be privileged over other roles and responsibilities, and that all workers can achieve their occupational dreams if they try hard enough. Instead, Cook et al. argued that women are highly invested in their roles across all domains of life, including in the community, home, and workplace. Thus, women place significant weight on their responsibilities to their family members and their communities when making career decisions. Additionally, many women face systemic barriers that affect their careers, including limited education on career opportunities, sexual harassment in the workplace, lack of affordable childcare, and a persistent gender wage gap (Cook et al., 2002).

Cook et al. (2002) argued that counselors working with women must strive to understand their clients' career-related behavior within the context of all their significant relationships. Thus, they put forth a model of career counseling in which practitioners select interventions that can "shape optimal person-environmental interactions" (Cook et al., 2002, p. 297). These interventions can be at the individual level or the system level. For example, a counselor working with a woman who has young children might help the client develop negotiation skills that she can use with her employer to obtain more flexible hours and with her partner to divide caregiving responsibilities more equitably. The counselor might also write a letter to their legislator advocating for broader access to government-subsidized childcare.

By acknowledging and honoring the systems in which women approach decisions about their careers, counselors working from the ecological model are better equipped to help women make choices that address their relationships and responsibilities at work, at home, and in their communities (Cook et al., 2002). This approach encourages counselors to attend to issues related to clients' competing responsibilities, navigation of systemic barriers, and interaction of microsystems. For several years, researchers have investigated components of this systemic reality by attending to dynamics related to career satisfaction, work-life balance, and social support.

Career Satisfaction

Multiple researchers (e.g., Han & Rojewski, 2017; O'Neil et al., 2004) have investigated how women's roles outside of work affect their occupational outcomes. In their study of women enrolled in an executive

training program, O'Neil et al. (2004) found that career satisfaction was directly affected by women's personal relationships and obligations. Women with an emergent career pattern—meaning their career path changed in response to other parts of life—reported significantly lower career satisfaction than women whose careers resembled a ladder, moving consistently in one direction without diversions. O'Neil et al. noted that this finding contradicts the narrative of women achieving career satisfaction by successfully making trade-offs among their various life roles.

In their study of women in the United States with college degrees, Han and Rojewski (2017) categorized women's career paths into five classes based on their economic attainment over time. Although the researchers found no difference in career satisfaction across the classes, they did find that women's family arrangements significantly impacted their economic attainment. Compared with women with limited paid work experience or who fluctuated in and out of the labor market, the women who worked without interruption and increased their occupational outcomes steadily over time were married for fewer of their working years and had fewer children (Han & Rojewski, 2017). The findings of Han and Rojewski (2017) and O'Neil et al. (2004) refute the traditional belief in the separation of one's work life and personal life (Cook et al., 2002); instead, the research shows that women's career satisfaction and economic attainment are dependent in part on their roles and responsibilities in other areas of life.

Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is the process of actively engaging in valued life roles in a way that allows one to feel competent and satisfied (Hirschi, 2020). Balancing the demands of work and life is particularly challenging for women who work in gender-neutral or male-dominated careers: They are less likely to put their careers on hold even during periods of intensified caregiving and thus tend to have demanding schedules and little time to care for themselves (Whitmarsh et al., 2007). As Cook et al. (2002) observed, although women in our culture are permitted to take on multiple roles—for instance, medical assistant *and* mother of young children, or research technician *and* caregiver for a parent with chronic health issues—they receive little support in doing so.

Challenges to work-life balance fall into two categories: *work-life conflict* and *life-work conflict*. Women experience work-life conflict when their work negatively affects their personal lives, and they experience life-work conflict when their personal lives negatively affect their work. Hamilton et al. (2006) measured self-reported prevalence of work-life conflict and life-work conflict among working women with varying family arrangements. They found that married women with children reported the highest levels of life-work conflict; in contrast, women across all family arrangements reported relatively consistent levels of work-life conflict. These findings suggest that work-life balance is an important topic for all women regardless of family structure and that being a parent or a partner can increase the prevalence of life-work conflict women face (Hamilton et al., 2006).

Social Support

In their meta-analysis of social support and work-life conflict, French et al. (2018) defined social support as “psychological and material resources provided through social relationships that can mitigate strains” (p. 288). This meta-analysis was based on 177 studies, most of which had samples comprising both women and men, with greater representation of women overall. Their findings indicated that social support consistently had a negative relationship to work-life conflict. Thus, as workers received more support from supervisors, coworkers, family members, and friends, they experienced less conflict between work and the other parts of their lives (French et al., 2018). The analysis revealed that the *perception* of support matters. When workers perceived that they were being supported, they felt less strain between their work lives and personal lives (French et al., 2018). Expressed in terms of the ecological model of career counseling (Cook et al., 2002), within microsystems (e.g., the workplace, the home, the community), female workers are constantly interacting with others, and these social interactions can influence the degree of support, conflict, and stress that women experience as they engage in multiple life roles.

Researchers have also investigated the relationship between social support and career satisfaction. Ford et al. (2007) published a meta-analysis of studies investigating relationships among career satisfaction, family satisfaction, and conflict. As with the meta-analysis by French et al. (2018), most of the 178 studies included in Ford et al.’s meta-analysis comprised samples of both women and men, but with greater representation of male participants overall. Ford et al. identified three variables within the family domain that were significantly correlated with job satisfaction: family support, family conflict, and family stress. Family conflict and family stress were negatively correlated with job satisfaction, meaning that as family conflict and stress increased, participants’ job satisfaction decreased. Family support was positively correlated with job satisfaction, meaning that as participants’ perception of support from their families increased, their job satisfaction increased as well (Ford et al., 2007). Within the ecological model of career counseling, Cook et al. (2002) highlighted the orientation toward relationships that many women have and recommended that counselors empower women to ask for more support at home and at work.

Researchers in career development and related fields have amassed significant evidence illuminating the challenges many women face carrying out roles at work and at home. Emerging findings such as decreases in women’s workforce participation (Ewing-Nelson & Tucker, 2021) and work productivity (Andersen et al., 2020; Feng & Savani, 2020) suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic tested the fragile balance experienced by some women between their responsibilities as workers and their responsibilities as caregivers. With the significant upheavals brought forth by COVID-19, this is a critical time to investigate the relationship between women’s caregiving and their career satisfaction. To explore these dynamics, we posed the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Do caregiving hours for children influence work-family conflict (WFC) and family-work conflict (FWC) for a sample of working women during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2: Do caregiving hours for adults influence WFC and FWC?

Research Question 3: Do WFC and FWC influence perceived social support?

Research Question 4: Does perceived social support influence career satisfaction?

On the basis of previous research (Ford et al., 2007; Hamilton et al., 2006; O’Neil et al., 2004), we hypothesized that (a) child caregiving hours will influence WFC and FWC, (b) adult caregiving hours will influence WFC and FWC, (c) WFC and FWC will influence perceived social support, and (d) perceived social support will influence career satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were 475 female staff members of a large regional employer—a university with an affiliated health care system—located in the midwestern region of the United States. To participate in the study, staff members had to identify as a woman and be at least 18 years old. Of the 553 surveys initiated, 78 surveys were less than half complete, resulting in a significant number of missing items. Removing these incomplete surveys yielded a final sample of 475. All participants identified as women, and their ages ranged from 19 to 72 years ($M = 40.2$, $SD = 9.47$). Participant characteristics are detailed in Table 1.

Procedure

After obtaining institutional review board approval, we recruited participants via email to all university staff members. Data were collected in mid-February 2021, approximately 11 months after the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a national emergency in the United States (Proclamation No. 9994, 2020). Those who were interested clicked a link in the email to learn more about the study, give their consent, and respond to the survey. The survey was anonymous, and individuals who completed it did so voluntarily. Participants were given the opportunity to enter a random drawing for one of twenty \$25 Amazon gift cards. Information for the drawing (name and email address) was collected separately from survey responses to preserve participants’ anonymity. Participants were asked to provide their age, racial identity, education level, career field, hours worked per week, and household makeup. For caregiving, participants shared how many hours per week they engaged in unpaid caregiving and their relationship(s) to the children and/or adults they cared for.

Measures

Career satisfaction. The Career Satisfaction Scale (CSS) is a five-item measure of individuals’ satisfaction with their career achievement, their progress toward career goals, and their income (Greenhaus et al., 1990).

TABLE 1
Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Race/ethnicity		
White	433	91.2
Asian	16	3.4
Hispanic/Latinx	8	1.7
Multiracial	8	1.7
Black/African American	5	1.1
Other	4	0.8
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	0.2
Highest education level		
Some primary or secondary school	10	2.1
High school diploma or equivalent	34	7.2
Associate's degree	51	10.7
Bachelor's degree	176	37.1
Master's degree	146	30.7
Doctoral degree	58	12.2
Work position		
Administrative/professional	241	50.7
Patient care	146	30.7
Research	64	13.5
Skilled trades	13	2.7
Campus services/facilities	9	1.9
Other	2	0.4
Work hours per week		
0–19	15	3.2
20–29	51	10.7
30–39	75	15.8
40–49	273	57.4
50 or more	61	12.9
Child caregiving hours per week		
0	84	17.7
1–10	36	7.6
11–20	27	5.7
21–30	39	8.2
31–40	43	9.1
41 or more	246	51.8
Adult caregiving hours per week		
0	390	82.1
1–10	53	11.1
11–20	12	2.5
21–30	8	1.7
31–40	3	0.6
41 or more	9	1.9

Note. *N* = 475. Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

Respondents indicate their level of agreement with statements such as “I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for advancement” using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. The CSS is widely used as a measure of career satisfaction (Spurk et al., 2011) because multiple research teams have found it to have good construct validity across a range of populations (Hofmans et al., 2008; Spurk et al., 2011). Reported alpha coefficients ranged from .74 to .88 (Greenhaus et al., 1990; Hofmans et al., 2008), indicating good internal reliability. In the current study, the alpha coefficient was .87.

WFC and FWC. The WFC Scale, developed by Netemeyer et al. (1996), is a five-item measure of the extent to which respondents' work responsibilities interfere with their family lives. One example is "My job produces strain that makes it difficult to fulfill family duties." Also developed by Netemeyer et al. (1996), the FWC Scale assesses the extent to which respondents' family responsibilities interfere with their work. Survey items for this scale mirror those of the WFC Scale (e.g., "Family-related strain interferes with my ability to perform job-related duties"). Respondents use a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* to indicate their level of agreement.

The WFC and FWC scales are used widely in career research and reflect two constructs that are separate but related (Kim et al., 2019), with a robust construct validity (Amstad et al., 2011). Alpha coefficients have ranged from .88 to .89 for the WFC and from .83 to .89 for the FWC (Netemeyer et al., 1996). In this study, the alpha coefficients were .92 for the WFC and .88 for the FWC.

Perceived social support. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988) is a 12-item measure of the extent to which an individual feels supported by family members, friends, and significant others. For example, participants indicate their level of agreement with the statement, "I get the emotional help and support I need from my family." This 7-point Likert scale ranges from 1 = *very strongly disagree* to 7 = *very strongly agree*. Originally developed using data from college students (Zimet et al., 1988), the MSPSS has been validated with a range of populations (Bruwer et al., 2008; Cobb & Xie, 2015). Reported alpha coefficients for the full scale have ranged from .86 to .92 (Bruwer et al., 2008; Cobb & Xie, 2015), indicating good internal reliability. Considering the scope of this research project, we used only the eight items addressing perceived support from family members and significant others. In this study, the alpha coefficient was .95.

Analyses

To test the research hypotheses, we conducted a path analysis using AMOS 23.0. Path analysis is an extension of the multiple regression model, which includes an investigation of existing causal relationships between variables to test a research model supported by previous findings (Streiner, 2005). In the current study, we identified direct and indirect effects for endogenous variables based on the regression weight that was calculated for each relationship. Goodness-of-fit statistics were also examined using multiple fit indices, including the comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR), according to the criteria proposed by Hooper et al. (2008; CFI \geq .90, TLI \geq .90, RMSEA \leq .07, and SRMR \leq .08). Finally, path coefficients and modification indices were carefully examined to determine the most parsimonious model fit.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Because the result of Little's missing completely at random (MCAR) test ($\chi^2 = 131.69$, $df = 188$, $p = .999$) indicated that the missing data of

this study were MCAR, we addressed the missing values (less than 0.5%) using the expectation-maximization approach. Before performing the path analysis, we investigated descriptive statistics and bivariate correlation coefficients between variables (see Table 2). Specifically, in terms of correlation coefficients (Schober et al., 2018), we found weak negative correlations between child caregiving hours and adult caregiving hours, between FWC and career satisfaction, and between FWC and perceived social support. In contrast, there were weak positive correlations between child caregiving hours and WFC, between child caregiving hours and FWC, and between perceived social support and career satisfaction. WFC and FWC indicated a moderate positive correlation. Adult caregiving hours were not significantly associated with WFC or FWC.

Path Analysis

We conducted a path analysis for our research model. The error terms of WFC and FWC were correlated ($r = .43, p < .001$) based on the literature review reporting a high correlation between two variables (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). Our model indicated a poor fit of the data: normed fit index (NFI) = .82, TLI = .49, CFI = .83, RMSEA = .11, and SRMR = .06. Subsequently, given the modification indices between variables, we correlated the error terms of child caregiving hours and adult caregiving hours ($r = -.25, p < .001$). Consequently, the final model fit indices were as follows: NFI = .97, TLI = .97, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .03, and SRMR = .02, which indicated an excellent fit of the model (Hooper et al., 2008), including the chi-square statistic ($\chi^2 = 5.61, df = 4, p = .230$). After checking the modification indices and regression coefficients using AMOS, we concluded that the model provided the most parsimonious fit to the data.

In terms of path coefficients (see Figure 1), child caregiving hours showed a positive relationship with WFC ($\beta = .11, p < .05$) and FWC ($\beta = .13, p < .01$), which supported the first hypothesis that child caregiving hours influence WFC and FWC. However, adult caregiving hours did not show significant relationships with WFC ($\beta = .06, p > .05$) or FWC ($\beta = .08, p > .05$), failing to support the second hypothesis that adult caregiving hours influence WFC and FWC. Furthermore, whereas FWC was negatively related to perceived social support ($\beta = -.14, p < .01$), the path from WFC to perceived social support was not significant ($\beta =$

TABLE 2
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations
for Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Child caregiving hours	6.12	3.64	—					
2. Adult caregiving hours	0.56	1.65	-.25***	—				
3. Career satisfaction	18.33	4.46	-.05	.04	—			
4. Work-family conflict	46.73	7.26	.10*	.03	-.06	—		
5. Family-work conflict	44.97	7.09	.11**	.05	-.16**	.43***	—	
6. Perceived social support	44.36	9.88	.04	-.07	.27***	-.07	-.14**	—

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

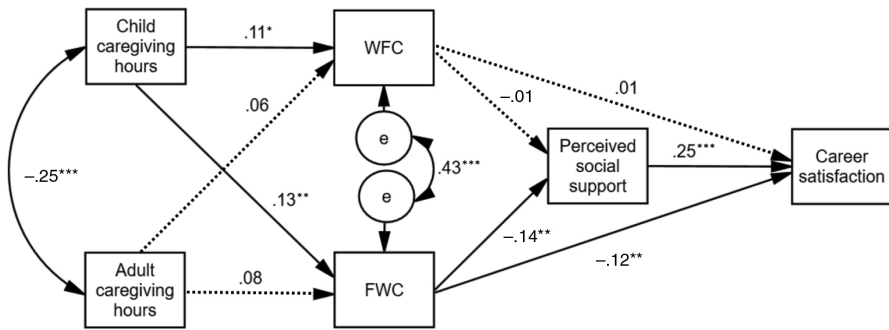


FIGURE 1
Path Analysis of Associations Among Caregiving Hours, Mediator Variables, and Career Satisfaction

Note. The dashed lines indicate a path that is not statistically significant. WFC = work-family conflict; FWC = family-work conflict; e = error term.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

$-.01, p > .05$), which partially satisfied the third hypothesis that WFC and FWC influence perceived social support. The final hypothesis was supported because perceived social support indicated a positive influence on career satisfaction ($\beta = .25, p < .001$).

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic brought new attention to the ongoing challenges women face in carrying out multiple life roles. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among hours spent caregiving, WFC and FWC, perceived support from family members and significant others, and career satisfaction for working women during the pandemic. By conducting a path analysis, we found that (a) hours spent caregiving for children influenced both WFC and FWC, (b) FWC influenced perceived social support, and (c) career satisfaction was influenced by both social support and FWC. We did not find links between adult caregiving hours and FWC or WFC or between WFC and perceived social support or career satisfaction.

The study revealed that, for participants who identified as caregivers, caregiving was a significant time commitment. This finding is especially true for women who were caregivers for children: A majority (62.9%) reported 41 or more caregiving hours per week. In comparison, in 2019, American women with children in the household under 18 years of age spent an average of 12.5 hours per week engaged in childcare as a primary activity. Those with children under 13 years of age spent an average of 40.7 additional hours per week in childcare, while performing other activities such as shopping and cleaning and engaging in recreational activities (BLS, 2020a). Women with children spent significant time caring for their children prior to the pandemic, and they continued to do so during the pandemic. This comparison in time use aligns with data from Carlson et al. (2020), which found that 27% of mothers reported spending more time on childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic and 60% reported no change in hours spent.

For women who were caregivers for adults, a majority (62.3%) reported spending 10 hours or fewer per week on caregiving; however, a significant minority (21.2%) reported weekly caregiving of 26 hours or more. By comparison, in 2019, caregivers who responded to a national survey reported spending an average of 23.7 hours per week on caregiving for adults (National Alliance for Caregiving & AARP, 2020). This 2019 average was greater than the hours reported by most women in the current study. Taken together, these data on child and adult caregiving hours indicate that caregiving is a time-intensive activity for many, regardless of public health and economic conditions. However, more research is needed on potential changes in the type and intensity of women's caregiving tasks during the pandemic and the potential impacts of sustained high-intensity caregiving. Additionally, our data revealed a significant negative correlation between hours spent caregiving for children and hours spent caregiving for adults. The negative correlation is supported by existing findings that, during midlife, women's caregiving hours for children decrease significantly as their caregiving hours for adults increase gradually (Dukhovnov & Zagheni, 2015; Patterson & Margolis, 2019).

In our sample, hours spent caregiving for children directly influenced both WFC and FWC; however, hours spent caregiving for adults did not. As childcare hours per week increased, both WFC and FWC increased. These relationships are consistent with previous findings that women who are wives and mothers experience greater FWC compared with women who are not wives and mothers (Hamilton et al., 2006; Whitmarsh et al., 2007). Although the relationships between adult caregiving hours and WFC and FWC were nonzero, they did not meet thresholds of statistical significance. This result is aligned with past findings that many workers who were also caregivers for adults reported feeling satisfied with their balance between work and family (Williams, 2004).

Whereas FWC influenced perceived social support for women in this study, WFC did not. In their meta-analysis, French et al. (2018) found evidence of relationships between social support and both WFC and FWC. However, their meta-analysis included studies that examined support from various sources, including managers and coworkers. We measured perceived social support from only participants' family members and significant others, which might have limited our investigation of the relationship between work-life conflict and all relevant sources of social support.

Finally, we found that career satisfaction was linked to perceived social support and to FWC but not to WFC. As perceived support from family members and significant others increased, career satisfaction increased as well. This finding is aligned with the Ford et al. (2007) meta-analysis, which found that family support was positively correlated with career satisfaction, whereas family stress and family conflict were negatively correlated with it. Our finding that FWC influences career satisfaction is consistent with previous research that women who shaped their career path in response to life circumstances reported lower career satisfaction than did women who were able to maintain a ladder-like path (O'Neil et al., 2004). Our finding that WFC was not linked to career satisfaction contrasts with research by Martins et al. (2002), which found that WFC

was negatively correlated with career satisfaction for women. Although longitudinal research is needed to explore fully the relationship between WFC and career satisfaction for women, one hypothesis may be that the expansion of work-from-home during the pandemic could have helped mitigate the impact of WFC on women's career satisfaction.

These findings provide partial support for the ecological model of career counseling (Cook et al., 2002). Central to the model is the assertion that many women have significant responsibilities outside of paid work. In our study, most participants reported 40 or more hours of paid work per week, and most participants who cared for children reported 40 or more hours of childcare per week. Thus, traditional models of career development that assume workers have someone at home to care for the children do not reflect the reality of many women's lives. Another tenet of the ecological model of career counseling is that the microsystems of one's life (e.g., work, home, community) interact with one another, and individuals think, feel, and behave within these complex interactions (Cook et al., 2002). In the present study, hours spent caregiving for children influenced the degree of conflict participants experienced between work life and family life. Additionally, support from those in participants' personal lives had a direct influence on their career satisfaction. When career counselors respect and seek to understand the complexity of women's lives at work and outside of work, they can better support women in identifying their career values and how to enact them (Cook et al., 2002).

Implications for Practice

Although Americans have demonstrated increasingly positive attitudes toward gender equality in the workplace, attitudes on gender roles at home have been slower to evolve (Scarborough et al., 2019). Counselors can better support women if they join with them in seeing the women's career decision-making as taking place within a larger ecosystem that also includes roles in their families and communities (Cook et al., 2002). Counselors working from the ecological model might ask clients about their major responsibilities outside of work and how these responsibilities affect their career decision-making. The COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted almost every aspect of private and public life including childcare, education, health care, and work, significantly altered the life ecosystem for many working women (Carlson et al., 2020). In the wake of significant events such as a pandemic, counselors can explore with clients how their responsibilities have shifted and how these shifts have affected their roles as workers, caregivers, and community members.

In the present study, women's caregiving hours for children were linked to WFC and FWC; in turn, FWC influenced perceptions of social support and career satisfaction. Cook et al. (2002) advocated for counselors to acknowledge openly the systemic issue that while women are permitted to take on multiple life roles, there is little support available to help make this balancing act manageable and fulfilling. By describing women's issues with life-work conflict and career satisfaction as part of a larger system, counselors can help women critically assess attributions of personal failure when they struggle to manage responsibilities at work

and at home (Cook et al., 2002). Counselors can also assist women in exploring the systemic barriers that may have limited their career development. Cook et al. highlighted one such barrier—the lack of affordable childcare, which has a disproportionate impact on working women. A counselor working with a woman who has young children might ask, “What would need to change for you to feel comfortable returning to work part-time?” After gathering information on these barriers, counselors can assist the client in identifying potential solutions. For example, Cook et al. recommended counselors be knowledgeable about local childcare options and offer free childcare while clients use their services.

Because women’s work lives cannot be cleaved from their personal lives, the support women do or do not receive from family members and significant others is a relevant topic for career counseling. Counselors might assess clients’ perceived social support for evidence of both strengths and challenges. Counselors could incorporate training on “I” statements, boundary setting, or negotiation (Cook et al., 2002) to assist women in communicating when they need more support. Counselors might also recommend that clients recognize the individuals in their lives who do support them, both to show gratitude and to encourage further provision of this support.

Career counselors can also assist women in identifying government- and employer-provided benefits that may be useful. For example, during the pandemic, the state of Vermont expanded paid sick leave to include time spent caring for a family member when the usual caregiving facility is closed (Cain Miller & Blum, 2021). Concurrently, some employers expanded benefits to include greater flexibility in scheduling, sabbaticals with partial pay, and reimbursement for childcare and adult care (Cain Miller & Blum, 2021). By partnering with clients to include a benefits evaluation in their career decision-making process, counselors can show support for working women while also empowering them to make decisions that work best for their lives. Beyond acknowledging the systemic issues that pose challenges for women who work and provide care, counselors can also advocate for changes in these systems. The pandemic was a time of significant policy change (Weible et al., 2020). Counselors can advocate for the continuation of policies that expanded support for working caregivers of all genders.

Limitations and Future Opportunities

This study has several limitations. Because the data were based on a cross-sectional survey, interpreting causal relationships between the variables should be done with care. Although our research model indicated an excellent model fit, future researchers might consider including other potential influences that could improve the strength and overall applicability of the path model. It is also worth noting that the beta coefficients in the path model indicated low to moderate associations.

Our sample consisted of predominantly White, highly educated employees of one midwestern university, which limits the generalizability of our findings. Considering the disproportionate impact of race on critical pandemic outcomes such as job loss (Ewing-Nelson, 2021), infection, and death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021), there

is a need for empirical studies that examine the experiences of women of color. Studies with racially diverse participants are also needed to explore more fully the ecological model of career counseling, which centers both gender and race (Cook et al., 2002). Future studies should also include those who are excluded when study recruitment reflects a binary model of gender, such as individuals who identify as genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or agender.

The data collection for this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period when women struggled to balance their work and their personal lives. Because these difficulties were exacerbated by the outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent school closures, it is possible that the outcomes of this study might have been different had the study been conducted during a different time. Although the results of this study do provide meaningful information about the challenges women face during the pandemic, the impact of the variables should be interpreted with due consideration to the sample size, participant demographics, and path coefficients.

The COVID-19 pandemic called attention to dynamics that were not new: Women often hold multiple roles that can come into conflict when there is not sufficient support in the environment. The ecological model of career counseling (Cook et al., 2002) offers a framework for conceptualizing women's life roles and relationships within a complex ecosystem. Counselors working from this model are positioned to understand better the tensions that arise for women in relation to work, caregiving, and other life activities, especially when significant events such as a global health emergency alter and stress personal ecosystems in profound ways. Although the pandemic likely contributed to increased life-work conflict and decreased career satisfaction for some women, it also shined a public spotlight and directed policy makers' attention to issues within the macrosystem that must be addressed to support working women.

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