



Article

Multilevel Continua of Mothers, Fathers and Childless Women and Men's Work–Life “Choices” and Their Constraints, Enablers and Consequences

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Abstract: Gendered and classed working, parenting and other life contexts create multifaceted interactions between quantitative (including time and effort-intensive) and qualitative (including needs, interests, aspirations and identities) work and life contexts. This research aimed to understand mothers, fathers and childless women and men's gendered and classed strategies for managing multifaceted work and life interactions in their multilevel contexts. The research consisted of a qualitative case study of a large Australian organisation that ostensibly prioritised diversity and inclusion and offered flexible working arrangements to all employees. A grounded theory approach was used to analyse forty-seven employees' responses to open-ended questions in a self-administered questionnaire, combined with iterative in-depth interviews with 10 employees. The findings suggested mothers, fathers, childless women and men's nuanced strategies for managing multifaceted work–life interactions were explained by multilevel continua of “choices” between incompatible quantitative and qualitative work and life contexts, embedded in gendered and classed individual, family, community, organisational and societal constraints, enablers and consequences, which inhibited agency to make genuine work–life choices. These “choices” reflected and reinforced societally and organisationally hegemonic working, mothering, fathering and childlessness discourses.

Keywords: work–life interactions; parent-status; femininities; masculinities; ideal workers; gender; class; Australia



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1. Introduction

Patriarchal, neoliberal capitalist societies such as Australia construct gendered working and parenting practices as integral to women and men's identities (Turnbull et al. 2020). However, working, parenting and other aspects of life can profoundly influence each other. Although work–life research has burgeoned in recent decades, it traditionally focused on heteronormative, married, middle-classed mothers, reinforcing discourses that limit “life” to women's responsibilities as mothers, and inhibiting understandings of work–life interactions among, for example, childless women and men, fathers, single parents, women with older children and, indeed, women with younger children who have needs, interests, aspirations and identities beyond mothering (Özbilgin et al. 2011; Pocock and Charlesworth 2017). Much existing work–life research has been quantitative, providing essential data measuring the degree of work–life interactions and causal relationships, such as gender and parent status (Beigi and Shirmohammadi 2017). However, recent reviews have highlighted the paucity of qualitative work–life research and called for more such research to augment holistic understandings of individuals' experiences of and strategies for managing multifaceted work–life interactions within their individual, household, community, organisational and societal-level contexts (Beigi and Shirmohammadi 2017; Thilagavathy

and Geetha 2020). While previous research (focusing on Australian literature, given the distinct societal contexts influencing work–life interactions) has elucidated discrete aspects of work–life interactions and strategies among mothers, fathers and childless women and men (Section 1.1), this qualitative research provides a deeper and more integrated explanation by aiming to understand, in their unique multilevel contexts, nuanced strategies for managing multifaceted work–life interactions among mothers, fathers and childless women and men working in one Australian organisation.

Before proceeding, we clarify our use throughout this paper of a number of contested terms. Terms such as “feminine”, “masculine” and “middle/working classed” refer to not biological characteristics, but qualities and practices which research suggests have been socially and discursively constituted as gendered or classed (e.g., Wajcman 1998; Ely and Meyerson 2000). “Patriarchal/gender” and “capitalist/class” describe unequal power relations between men and women and capital-owning classes and employee classes (Wright 2005; Connell and Pearse 2015). “Neoliberal” refers to modern capitalism’s dismantling of governments and organisations’ responsibility for citizens’ economic and social wellbeing and expectations of independent, self-sufficient, economically productive, individually responsible adults (e.g., Harris Rimmer and Sawyer 2016; Runswick-Cole et al. 2016). We present these terms in brackets throughout the text to emphasise their use as socially constructed terms.

1.1. Theoretical and Empirical Background

Work–life theories, including what constitutes “work” and “life” and the interactions between them, are profuse and contested (Geurts and Demerouti 2003). Work–family conflict has been influentially defined as pressures in one role interfering with participation and effectiveness in the other role, including time-based conflict (time or schedules required in one role are incompatible with the other) and strain-based conflict (strain symptoms such as anxiety, depression and fatigue arising from one role affecting the other) (Greenhaus et al. 2006). Work–family and work–life balance have been inconsistently defined as, for example, equality or alignment of time, resources, involvement, participation, functioning and/or satisfaction in both domains (Clark 2000; Greenhaus et al. 2003; Voydanoff 2005). In this respect, quantitative research examining work–life interactions among Australian mothers, fathers and childless women and men have found that single mothers, followed closely by coupled mothers, reported the greatest work–life interference, then coupled fathers, coupled childless women, single fathers and single childless women (all of whom reported similar levels of interference), and lastly coupled and single childless men (Pocock et al. 2012a; Chapman et al. 2014). Despite these comparisons, employees can experience work–life conflict regardless of sex or parent-status (Pocock et al. 2008; Turnbull et al. 2016).

Although constructs such as work–life conflict and balance are invaluable for understanding discrete work–life interactions, by focusing on people’s roles, tasks and responsibilities as employees and parents, and less commonly partners, family or household members and friends, they do not encompass the complex gamut of employees’ work–life experiences (Geurts and Demerouti 2003; Pocock and Charlesworth 2017). Other theories have more inclusively and holistically conceptualised “work” and “life” as encompassing physical, emotional, material, social, cultural, ideological, discursive and structural demands and resources (including responsibilities, expectations, norms, supports, rewards, geographies, values, preferences, aspirations, interests, needs, motivations and characteristics) which individuals experience in their roles, relationships, identities and performances as employees, colleagues, managers, subordinates (in their working lives), parents, partners, relatives, pet owners, household members, friends, community members (in their family, social and community lives) and individual selves (e.g., Barnett 1998; Geurts and Demerouti 2003; Özbilgin et al. 2011; Pocock et al. 2012b; Wilkinson et al. 2017).

Beyond the nature of work–life interactions, some theorists have argued individuals can exercise agency by making decisions about managing work and life interactions, thus choosing whether life conflicts with work (life–work conflict) or work conflicts with life

(work–life conflict) (e.g., [Barnett 1998](#); [Greenhaus and Powell 2003](#)). Strategies managing time-based conflict include time-shifting, segmenting, prioritising or scaling back time-consuming work or life demands (e.g., [Becker and Moen 1999](#); [Edwards and Rothbard 2000](#); [Moen et al. 2013](#)), and mobilisation of instrumental support for such strategies ([Powell and Greenhaus 2006](#)). In this respect, employment benefits such as flexible working hours and locations and part-time hours can facilitate time-shifting and scaling back strategies. Australian research has found that employees work flexibly or part-time regardless of sex and parent-status, but that mothers with pre-school aged children and children under 16 years are most likely to request flexibility ([Skinner et al. 2016](#)), while mothers are most likely to work part-time hours (Australian Bureau of Statistics ([ABS 2016, 2017](#))).

Beyond time and strain-based conflict, strategies managing multifaceted work and life-centric needs, aspirations, qualities and identities include compensatory strategies seeking fulfilment of needs in one domain that are inadequately met in the other ([Edwards and Rothbard 2000](#)) and trading off incompatible work and life-centric needs ([Barnett 1998](#)). For example, research has found some mothers work for the challenge and adult interaction their relationships with children lack ([Diamond et al. 2007](#)), some parents compromise personal interests and wellbeing to meet work and parenting demands ([Craig 2005](#); [Pedersen and Lewis 2012](#)), and some childless people describe not trading off, but freedom to engage in, personal interests ([Pedersen and Lewis 2012](#); [Turnbull et al. 2017](#)).

Finally, more subtle strategies reverberate from individuals' practical work–life management strategies. For example, studies have found some parents engage in ideological work in the face of the chasm between their work–life strategies and societal, organisational and internalised working, mothering and fathering ideals to make their strategies morally intelligible to themselves ([Pocock 2003](#); [Björk 2013](#)).

Crucially, some theorists have avoided reinforcing neoliberal work–life discourses of individual responsibility for problems created by organisational and societal structures ([Lewis et al. 2007](#)). Such theorists acknowledge that individuals' multifaceted work and life contexts and choices are entrenched in psychological, physical, social, cultural, ideological, discursive and normative contexts produced by multilevel power relations (e.g., [Barnett 1998](#); [Greenhaus and Powell 2003](#); [Özbilgin et al. 2011](#); [Pocock et al. 2012b](#)). We have explored the societal and organisational-level contexts in which participants' experiences of and choices about work–life interactions were embedded at length elsewhere ([Turnbull et al. 2020, 2022](#)). We summarise those contexts, along with previous research on community and household-level contexts, below.

1.2. Societal, Organisational, Community and Household-Level Contexts

At the societal level, gender and class power relations include the social, discursive and ideological construction of symbolic hierarchies within and between masculinities, femininities and workers, which idealise and reward practices, characteristics and qualities upholding and stigmatise and penalise those opposing extant power relations ([Gramsci 1971](#); [Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#); [Schippers 2007](#)). Our review of previous research on Australian political and media discourses and government policies and legislation ([Turnbull et al. 2020](#)) suggested Australia's patriarchal gender and neoliberal capitalist class relations construct hierarchies of (gendered, middle-classed, heteronormative, Western) working and parenting practices, characteristics and qualities. Such hierarchies idealise and promise to materially reward full-time, individually responsible citizen workers and breadwinning (involved outside working hours) fathers. Intensive (career-sacrificing, selfless, nurturing, but subordinated part-time working) mothers are rhetorically idealised but materially unrewarded. Working childless people without non-working lives are expected, but stigmatised as selfish, incomplete and immature. Similarly stigmatised and suppressed are (unnatural, selfish, career-oriented) full-time working mothers and (emasculated) less-than-full-time working fathers.

Additionally, [Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault \(2017\)](#) have argued societal masculinity–femininity cultures can influence organisational contexts and individual-level experiences.

In this respect, Australian culture has been described as valuing (masculine) authority, achievement, material success and assertiveness over (feminine) collaboration, relationships, modesty and quality of life (Leung and Moore 2003; Jones 2007). Finally, Australian government policies relevant to work–life interactions include minimum paid annual, long service, sick and carer’s leave entitlements, and parents, carers, and limited others’ entitlement to request flexible working arrangements, which employers can refuse on reasonable business grounds (Graham et al. 2018).

At the organisational level, the case study organisation (whose involvement is outlined in Section 2), which is identified by the pseudonym “ComCo”, was a large incorporated private company and multinational subsidiary that manufactured consumer goods. In the following, phrases in double quotation marks were participants’ descriptions. Employees worked in support (legal, finance, corporate affairs and “female-dominated” human resources), “male-dominated” operations (manufacturing, supply chain, logistics, quality, research and development) and commercial (“female-dominated” marketing and “male-dominated” sales) areas (noting that participants used the words “male-dominated” and “female-dominated” to indicate the majority of people working in those business areas were male or female, respectively). Employees were based in male and “blue collar” dominated factories; the field (where “a lot of males” were in permanently employed senior roles, but “probably 80 per cent” of casually employed junior sales were “female”), state offices, or “heterosexual” and “middle-classed” but gender-diverse national office.

Our previously published research on organisational contexts emerging from an analysis of organisational documentation and participant narratives about ComCo (Turnbull et al. 2022) suggested ComCo’s overarching drive for “growth on growth on growth on growth” flowed to interlinking growth mechanisms in the form of organisational leadership, manager and workplace values, cultures, policies, practices and behaviours, as well as discourses of quantitatively extreme and qualitatively conformant ideal workers (Acker 2006). These organisational contexts were embedded in societal-level power relations, rendering them gendered and classed. In this respect, ComCo’s (masculine, neoliberal, capitalist) growth imperative employed not only the typical (masculine, individualistic) mechanisms and ideal worker discourses, but also co-opted (feminine, collective) mechanisms and ideal worker discourses to promote growth. These included (masculine) autocratic leadership and individualistic, self-promoting, extroverted, confident workplace cultures, co-existing with, but prioritised as more effective at “delivering” growth than, (feminine) supportive, empowering leadership and collaborative workplace cultures. Similarly, employee high performance was rewarded with (masculine, neoliberal) individual salary increases, bonuses and career progression. Beneficent mechanisms for, but deprioritised to, growth, included (feminine) inclusion and diversity, and mainstreamed flexibility for “all” employees, to enable (masculine) work and (feminine) life (where “life” loses). However, belying flexibility for “all” were understandings that, in ComCo, flexibility and part-time hours were “for” mothers more than fathers and childless people; flexibility was not available in (working-classed) “blue collar” roles; flexibility and part-time hours were subject to adequate tenure and performance; and part-time hours could be stigmatised and penalised with lack of “challenge” and “career progression”. Ideal worker discourses flowed from these growth mechanisms, which expected not only (masculine) quantitatively extreme high performance, workload, hard work, working hours, availability and flexibility for work, but also qualitative characteristics and practices. These included (masculine, middle-classed) commitment, (masculine, neoliberal) self-promotion and confidence, (feminine, collective) relationships and collaboration, and (masculine, middle-classed) ambition and personal growth.

At the community level, research has highlighted various contexts influencing work–life interactions and strategies. These include local availability of adequate employment, public transport, childcare, schools, affordable housing and extended family and social support networks (Barnett 1998; Pocock et al. 2012b; Greenhaus and ten Brummelhuis 2013). Such contexts can also be gendered, geographically constraining mothers, in partic-

ular, to inadequate local job opportunities that may not satisfy other life contexts against the background of mothers' disproportionate responsibility for caregiving (Pocock and Charlesworth 2017).

Finally, household contexts influencing work–life interactions and strategies include basic household structures (whether individuals are married, partnered, cohabiting, single or have dependent children); paid working, caring and domestic labour structures; and responsibility for household incomes (such as dual full-time earning couples, full-time earning/caregiver couples, one-and-a-half worker couples, and sole earners/caregivers) (Powell and Greenhaus 2010; Pocock et al. 2012b). In Australia, most heterosexual couples with children conform to the one-and-a-half worker model of full-time working fathering and part-time working mothering (ABS 2016, 2017), while mothers devote more time than fathers to caring and domestic labour (Argyrous et al. 2017). As such, both community and household-level contexts can reflect and reinforce societally idealised breadwinning fathering and part-time working intensive mothering.

2. Materials and Methods

This qualitative case study of an Australian company applied a critical feminist grounded theory approach to data analysis (Layder 1993; Fassinger 2005; Corbin and Strauss 2008). The grounded theory approach enriched existing work–life theory (Mishra et al. 2014) by enabling a nuanced understanding in the case study organisation (Holgerson and Romani 2020) of how mothers, fathers and childless women and men represented, understood, complied with or resisted work–life interactions (Corbin and Strauss 2008). However, aligning with multilevel conceptualisations of work–life interactions emphasised in Section 1.1, the critical feminist grounded theory approach positioned these understandings within the context of multilevel power relations (Layder 1993; Fassinger 2005). Although theories regarding multilevel gender and class relations influenced our sensitising concepts, we took the view that elucidating employees' experiences and understandings in a unique organisational context called for explanation grounded in data, which was contextualised within extant work–life theory and literature after analysis commenced (Fassinger 2005; Corbin and Strauss 2008). With the exception of briefly outlining the theory, previous Australian literature and multilevel contexts in Section 1, we emphasise our process of reviewing and incorporating in the dataset previous theory and literature only after analysis commenced; that is, by including such literature in the findings, rather than presenting a separate comprehensive literature review (Dunne 2011).

In 2018, ComCo agreed to be involved in the study, but limited participation to “white collar” employees remunerated by annual salary, excluding “blue collar” and casual employees paid hourly. A senior ComCo representative emailed eligible employees in early 2019, inviting them to complete an online questionnaire. From the total of 84 respondents, this analysis includes 47 respondents' answers to open-ended questions asking them to describe any negative and positive experiences working at ComCo as mothers, fathers or childless women or men. The lead author then interviewed ten employees from late 2019 to mid-2020 (noting this paper explores participants' experiences before COVID-19). Of the interviewees, six were recruited using questionnaire contact details and four through snowball sampling. Participants were interviewed twice for around 45 to 90 min on each occasion. The semi-structured interviews began by asking how participants experienced working at ComCo as mothers, fathers, or women or men without children, then used probes and prompts if necessary. Second interviews covered topics not explored in, and issues arising from, first interviews. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Three interviewees validated their transcripts. Unfortunately, constraints imposed by ComCo prevented us from recruiting a larger sample or proceeding to theoretical sampling. However, combining qualitative questionnaire with interviewee data yielded various perspectives and facilitated categorical saturation of many categories (Fassinger 2005). As Table 1 shows, the total of 51 participants (accounting for duplication between 6 questionnaire respondents and interviewees) included comparable numbers of

women and men; mothers, fathers and childless women; and people working in ComCo's support, operations and commercial areas. However, few childless men participated, while people who were based in head office, full-time employees, managers, bachelor-qualified, Australian-born, spoke English at home, and aged 35 years or over, predominated.

Table 1. Participant demographic characteristics (excluding missing data).

	Interviewees (n = 10)	Questionnaire Respondents (n = 47)	Total ¹ (n = 51)
Sex and parent status			
Fathers	2	17	19
Mothers	4	14	14
Childless women	2	13	13
Childless men	2	3	5
Age (years)			
25 to 34	4	5	7
35 to 44	5	17	19
45 or above	1	24	24
Education level			
Bachelor or above	8	35	39
Certificate or diploma		6	6
Year 12 or below		6	6
Country of birth			
Australia	6	30	32
Overseas	4	17	19
Language spoken at home			
English	8	38	42
Other		8	8
Management level			
Managers	7	30	32
Non-managers	3	16	18
Current working hours			
Full-time	10	44	48
Part-time	0	3	3
Main worksite			
Head office	8 ²	28	32
Factory	1	13	13
Field or state office	1	5	5
Department			
Commercial	3	12	14
Support	5	15	17
Operations	2	18	18

¹ Totals account for six interviewees who were also questionnaire participants. ² Three interviewees based in head office regularly worked at factories.

Using QSR NVivo 12, the lead author engaged in data immersion, and iteratively and inductively collected and analysed data using open, axial and selective coding, facilitated by memos and constant comparison between data, codes and categories, and existing theory and literature (Layder 1993; Fassinger 2005; Corbin and Strauss 2008). Throughout analysis, the lead author discussed and refined concepts, categories and the core category with the other authors. Open coding involved breaking down and questioning and applying conceptual labels to data to understand what was said and unsaid (such as participants' descriptions and explanations of different "choices" about managing work–life conflicts, which were dominated by "choices" to allocate more or less time to work and different aspects of life, but also necessitated "choices" to meet or sacrifice qualitative work or life-

centric needs). Axial coding involved grouping concepts into categories identifying and explaining relationships and inconsistencies between categories, and incorporating extant theory and literature to explicate relationships with multilevel power relations (consisting of three broad categories of “choices” facilitating life and compromising work, accommodating work and life, or acquiescing to work–life conflict, the quantitative and qualitative sacrifices such choices involved, and the nuanced acknowledged and unacknowledged gendered and classed multilevel contexts in which such choices were embedded). During selective coding, a core category was identified: in the case of this research, a continuum (Holton 2010) that integrated all other categories: the multilevel continua of constraints, enablers and consequences explaining work–life “choices”.

Recognising that researchers construct knowledge, we (as a mother and two childfree women) incorporated other knowledge and perspectives by recruiting fathers and childless men as well as mothers and childless women, analysing data inductively and reviewing and incorporating work–life literature and theory after completing open-coding. We protect ComCo’s confidentiality in a small market such as Australia by broadly identifying its industry and not specifying its number of employees. We protect participants’ confidentiality by attributing quotations with the minimum descriptors required to compare nuances, similar to other organisational research (Connell 2006). We do not use pseudonyms because cross-referencing quotations could enable identification of participants by their ComCo colleagues. In-paragraph participant quotations are shown in double quotation marks.

3. Results

A heavily saturated category emerged of participants making “choices” about how to manage multifaceted work–life interactions in an organisation which provided mainstreamed flexibility supporting employees to make choices to achieve work and life goals, but simultaneously expected “excessive”, “ridiculous” and “unpredictable” workloads, hours, intensity, availability and flexibility for work which interfered with the lives of “those with children [and] without”; and “celebrated” diverse ideas and backgrounds, but expected “assimilation” to qualitative practices and attributes which led to “stress”, “worry”, “anxiety” and “compromises” for some participants. This “choice” narrative reflected neoliberal work–life balance discourses of individual responsibility (Lewis et al. 2007) for managing what many participants nonetheless recognised as immutable family, community, organisational and societal structures inimical to work–life balance. In this respect, participants’ “choices” about managing multifaceted work–life interactions were explained by interrelated continua of gendered and classed constraints, enablers and consequences at the individual, family, community, organisational and societal levels, summarised in Figure 1.

At the individual-level, participants made choices about managing time and strain-based conflicts, including combinations of choices facilitating some life contexts, accommodating work and life contexts, and acquiescing to work demands (Figure 1, row A). Concurrently, participants’ choices involved meeting or trading off other life-contexts (row B), which societal-level discourses suggest are gendered and classed (Section 1.2). These include (masculine) breadwinning responsibilities and aspirations, (feminine-encumbered) life-centric balance needs and identities relating to non-work relationships, responsibilities, interests and wellbeing, and work-centric (masculine, middle-classed) challenge, authenticity and meaning and (feminine) relational needs and identities (Bailey 2000; Mainiero and Sullivan 2005; Armstrong 2006). Thus, participants’ choices produced combinations of quantitative (time and strain-based) conflict and qualitative (needs, values, aspirations, qualities and identity-based) congruence or incongruence between work and life.

	1. Facilitating life	2. Accommodating work and life substantially and regularly	3. Accommodating work and life minimally and occasionally	4. Acquiescing to work
Individual-level “choices” and consequences				
A. Choices about time and strain-based work and life conflicts	Resigning; part-time hours; working usual business hours; containing excessive working hours; adjusting roles; using short-term leave ¹	Temporal/spatial flexibility; flexibility compromises; dedicated time for life; communicating boundaries; planning work and life	Minimal and/or ad hoc flexibility (starting early to finish on time; limited spatial flexibility; ad hoc flexibility) ^{2,3,4}	Not using flexibility or leave; going all in; using troughs for life; relying on support networks ^{2,3,4}
B. Trading-off between needs, values, attributes, aspirations and identities, creating work and life congruence or incongruence	Meet life-centric needs; trade off work-centric needs and deviate from organisational expectations ¹	Meet e.g., life-centric parenting needs, work-centric relationship building expectations; trade off e.g., life-centric personal needs and work-centric challenge needs, and deviate from organisational employee growth expectations ¹	Meet work-centric challenge needs and organisational extreme work expectations; trade-off some or all life-centric balance needs; inconsistently meet or trade off work-centric relational needs and organisational relationship-building expectations ^{2,3,4}	
C. Ideological work (i) Mothers	Mothers feel guilty, justify deviating from organisational expectations	Mothers feel guilty, justify deviating from organisational, societal and internalised expectations		Mothers feel guilty, justify deviating from societal and internalised expectations
(ii) Fathers	Fathers justify deviating from societal and organisational breadwinning fathering expectations		Fathers feel guilty, justify deviating from personal fathering aspirations and organisational working expectations	Fathers feel guilty, justify deviating from personal fathering aspirations
(iii) Childless people	Childless people justify deviating from societal and organisational citizen-working expectations			No ideological work (meets organisational and societal working expectations)
Gendered family and community-level constraints and enablers				
D. Caregiving responsibilities	High, inflexible (interacts with organisational flexibility benefits to create flexibility handcuffs constraining resignation) ^{1,5}	Low to moderate, flexible (interacts with organisational flexibility benefits to create flexibility enticements discouraging resignation) ^{2,3}		Low, flexible ^{3,4}
E. Caregiving and domestic support	Insufficient ¹		Sufficient ² or unnecessary ^{3,4}	
F. Paid working responsibilities	Low to moderate	High		
G. Financial circumstances	Financially free to resign to meet personal needs ^{3,4} and remain authentic ⁴	Financially tethered to working ⁷ and compromising work and life-centric needs (interacts with “generous” organisational financial rewards to create golden handcuffs constraining resignation) ^{1,3}		
H. Geographic circumstances	Geographic tethering ⁵		Long commute	Shorter commute Geographic freedom ⁶
Neoliberal-capitalist-masculine growth-driven organisational-level constraints, enablers and consequences⁷				
I. Policies and discourses	Mainstreamed flexibility (including flexible hours, locations, part-time and leave) and diversity for growth	Flexibility for life		Quantitatively extreme (uncumbered and flexible for work) ^{1,2} and qualitatively conformant ^{1,3} workers for growth
J. Social, workload, financial, career consequences	Stigmatised and penalised ¹	Stigmatised ¹ and substantial remote working penalised ¹	Accepted ^{2,3,4}	Valued and rewarded ^{2,3,4}
K. Performance prerequisites (requiring tenure and seniority)	High = trust, entitled to flexibility, reduced career penalties for not conforming to other organisational expectations (except part-time)			Low = distrust, not entitled to flexibility, career penalties
L. Role, area, site	White-collar, head office			Blue-collar, male-dominated factories, operations; female-dominated customer-facing sales
M. Colleague and manager support for choices	Inconsistent: sometimes supported, sometimes sabotaged, and nuanced depending on sex and parent-status			Unequivocal support
N. Interpersonal interactions (i) Mothers	Expected in mothers but judged as uncommitted workers	Expected in mothers but judged as bad mothers and uncommitted workers	Mothers judged as bad mothers	
(ii) Fathers	Fathers judged as bad fathers and uncommitted workers		Fathers accepted as good involved breadwinning fathers	Expected in good breadwinning fathers
(iii) Childless people	Childless people judged as bad workers: abusing flexibility		Inconsistently judged or accepted in childless people	Expected in childless people
Societal-level contexts: neoliberal-capitalist-patriarchal hierarchies of workers, femininities and masculinities⁸				
O. Mothers	Part-time working intensive mothering idealised	Selfish, career-focused full-time working mothering stigmatised		
P. Fathers	Less than full-time or non-traditional working hours stigmatised		Breadwinning (involved outside business hours) fathering idealised	
Q. Childless people	Stigmatised as having no lives outside work and not legitimately needing flexibility			Citizen-working expected but stigmatised as immature, incomplete adults

Figure 1. Multilevel continua of work–life “choices” and their constraints, enablers and consequences. Notes: ¹ usually mothers with younger children; ² usually fathers with younger children; ³ usually mothers with older children; ⁴ usually childless people; ⁵ usually women and mothers; ⁶ usually men and fathers; ⁷ source: Turnbull et al. (2022); ⁸ source: Turnbull et al. (2020).

However, the multilevel continua suggested individual “choices” were embedded in gendered household and community-level constraints and enablers (rows D to H), including caregiving responsibilities, caregiving and domestic support, paid working responsibilities, financial circumstances and geographic circumstances. Figure 1 also suggests that participants’ individual, family and community-level contexts were mired in organisational (rows I to N) and societal-level (rows O to Q) constraints and penalties for deviating from, and enablers and rewards for meeting, the sometimes complementary and sometimes conflicting organisationally and societally idealised working, mothering and fathering as qualities and practices discussed in Section 1.2. These multilevel contexts

constrained participants' agency to make genuine "choices" about work–life interactions and required participants to undertake ideological work (Pocock 2003) to justify "choices" deviating from internalised, organisational and societal working, mothering, fathering and childlessness discourses (row C). The following sections explore how the different levels of the continua constrain or enable predominantly temporal choices facilitating life and compromising work (Section 3.1), accommodating life and work (Section 3.2) or acquiescing to work–life conflict (Section 3.3), but which simultaneously fulfil or trade-off qualitative life or work-centric personal needs. Relevant cells in Figure 1 are cross-referenced as, for example, 1A for column 1, row A; 1A–3A for cells, 1A, 2A and 3A inclusive; and 1A, 4A for cells 1A and 4A).

3.1. "Choices" Facilitating Life and Compromising Work

Some participants' "choices" facilitated some life contexts by scaling back (Moen et al. 2013) or "taking a stand" against some job demands (Figure 1, 1A). As well as producing life–work conflict, many such "choices" involved trade-offs between life contexts (Barnett 1998) (Figure 1, 1B) and required ideological work justifying deviation from organisational, societal and internalised expectations (Figure 1, 1C). Participants made these "choices" to resolve not only time and strain-based conflicts (Greenhaus and Powell 2003) between (masculine neoliberal) job demands and life-centric (feminine) balance needs, but also incongruence between ComCo's cultures and expectations and participants' (middle-classed) work-centric authenticity needs (which often aligned with working in accordance with feminine values of supporting, empowering and caring for others and the environment) and (middle-classed, masculine) challenge needs (Mainiero and Sullivan 2005).

3.1.1. Life–Work "Freedom": Resigning and Taking a Stand

Similar to other high-demands industries (Thornton 2016), a childless woman and man radically scaled back work by resigning (Moen et al. 2013) (Figure 1, 1A). The childless man resigned to redress incongruence between "arrogant" leadership conflicting with his values of empowering others, and unfulfilled career growth needs (Figure 1, 1B). The childless woman resigned to resolve time and strain-based conflicts from unachievable quantitative demands reducing her time for life and "breaking" her health (Figure 1, 1A), and incongruence between ComCo's commercial "mission" necessitating "pushing people too hard" and her values of caring for others (Figure 1, 1B).

So, it's a dual thing . . . I feel ill because I don't feel right about the mission . . . And I'm working hard making myself feel ill, but it was pointless. [Childless woman]

However, these participants' capacity to resign arose from life-contexts attenuating their reliance on work and endowing them with "freedom" to seek employment meeting their needs. Supporting Cohen's (2014) finding that financial security enabled such freedom, both participants lacked unmanageable financial responsibilities (facilitated for the man by having no mortgage (Figure 1, 1G) and the woman by having a shared earning partner (Figure 1, 1F)). Although such "freedom" resembled that of some other childless people (Follmer et al. 2018), some single childless people have felt financially reliant upon working (Wilkinson et al. 2017). Additionally, both participants had met personal needs to adequately develop careers and employability, and the man had secured alternative employment (Figure 1, 1B), before which they had felt constrained from resigning. These explanations performed the ideological work of establishing ongoing conformance to, or merely ephemeral deviation from, societal career-oriented childless citizen-worker discourses (Turnbull et al. 2020) (Figure 1, 1Ciii).

I'm one of the lucky ones who's able to go . . . We're in a reasonable space financially . . . I've got enough [professional] benefit. [Childless woman]

Financial "freedom" also enabled these participants to manage incongruence between personal values and ComCo's cultures by authentically speaking out and taking risks, creating life–work incongruence (Figure 1, 1B). For example, the childless man described

not having a “massive external risk profile” as “empowering me . . . to be more challenging of the environment”, which was also enabled by a “small network” of supportive colleagues, managers and senior leaders (Figure 1, 1M), as in [Shaw and Leberman’s \(2015\)](#) study.

Some mothers with younger children had considered resigning to resolve time and strain-based conflict and unmet challenge and authenticity needs, similar to other mothers ([Mainiero and Sullivan 2005](#); [Cahusac and Kanji 2014](#)). However, financial and geographic contexts constrained them to working at ComCo, inhibiting life-facilitating strategies ([Follmer et al. 2018](#)). These included the household-level context of being primary or shared earners (Figure 1, 1F) and the community-level context of working near home, school and support networks (Figure 1, 1H).

I know somebody who has a very ill child . . . it’s typical for him to [work] on the weekends, and long days at work. And he’s really cut up about this child . . . and really stretched. He wishes he could leave, but he can’t . . . because he’s the sole breadwinner.
[Childless woman]

This life–work tethering was exacerbated by ComCo’s “generous” remuneration (Figure 1, 1J) and flexibility benefits (Figure 1, 1I), labour-market contexts including other employers’ inferior benefits and societal contexts not mandating remuneration levels and flexibility ([Pocock and Charlesworth 2017](#)). For example, some primary or shared-earning parents were conscious that ComCo’s “generous” remuneration compounded financial life–work tethering.

Having a mortgage and a kid . . . Because [ComCo] pays well, it limits you in changing [employers] to suit your life. [Father]

Similarly, mothers with younger children were cognisant that their strategies of working flexibly to accommodate work and life (Section 3.2.1, Figure 1, 2A, 2B) were essential to fulfilling highly demanding roles, maintaining (but not necessarily progressing) challenging careers and meeting intensive mothering aspirations requiring working-hours mothering, as elsewhere ([McDonald et al. 2005](#)).

The flexibility is what kept me doing it so long because I can be a mum but still get my job done . . . I could go to another company, but with all the flexibility, would I want to change that? Even though it’s a lot of hours . . . the flexibility makes it for me.
[Mother, manager]

These mutually reinforcing life and work contexts produced golden handcuffs for some parents, flexibility handcuffs for some mothers and flexibility enticements for some fathers (who appreciated, but did not need, flexibility), which constrained them from resigning to resolve work–life conflicts, as elsewhere ([Lewis and Humbert 2010](#)). Rather than resign, some parents traded off life-centric balance and work-centric challenge and authenticity needs (Figure 1, 2B). For example, in contrast to the childless man who remained authentic, golden and flexibility handcuffs constrained a mother to working for a company whose “commercial culture” necessitated inauthentic compromises of her social and environmental values and challenge needs.

I feel like it’s completely inappropriate to compromise what I’m getting out of work to . . . be a mother . . . but I also think, I’m a financial provider now. At times, I feel like I’m selling out on my values to support my family . . . I just have to be comfortable with that. [Mother]

The contexts influencing parents’ financial and flexibility constraints were gendered. Although primary and shared earning mothers and fathers in this study were financially constrained, men remain more likely than women to be primary earners ([ABS 2017](#)) and experience such constraints. However, some mothers’ flexibility handcuffs were exacerbated by partners’ insufficient caregiving support (Figure 1, 2E), combined with their efforts to flexibly perform organisational extreme working (Figure 1, 4I) and societal intensive mothering expectations (Figure 1, 1O) during and outside working hours (Section 3.2.1).

Conversely, the fathers' flexibility enticements were rendered less salient by adequate partner support (Figure 1, 3E) and their ability to combine extreme working with societally idealised outside working hours involved fathering (Section 3.2.6, Figure 1, 4Q). However, a mother with "more independent" (Figure 1, 3D) and "financially easier" older children (Figure 1, 1G), who was no longer subject to societal time-intensive mothering discourses (Maher 2005) (Figure 1, 1O), felt less constrained by financial and flexibility needs. Thus, she had "freedom" akin to the childless participants and was "looking around" for external employment to resolve the work–life incongruence of a "ceiling [on] what I'm doing" and a "big question around . . . challenge" creating unfulfilled career challenge and progression needs (Figure 1. 1B).

The participants who had resigned perceived no negative consequences for doing so. However, one participant related a colleague's experience of an "aggressive" male leader threatening to "destroy his career" if he followed his former manager to another company (Figure 1, 1J). Ultimately, the "unhappy" colleague resigned without alternative employment.

3.1.2. Working Part-Time

A minority of (mostly female) participants scaled back to working part-time hours to manage parenting responsibilities (Figure 1, 1A). For example, two mothers temporarily performed societally idealised part-time working and intensive mothering femininities (Figure 1, 1O) by briefly working part-time after parental leave, enabled by the household-level context of shared earning making reduced household incomes manageable (Figure 1, 1F). However, they had different reasons for reverting to organisationally expected full-time working. As elsewhere (Pocock 2003), one mother's job "suited" her needs for "socialising" and "challenge" and was "good for [her] mental health", (Figure 1, 2B) creating life–work congruence through enhanced engagement, availability and commitment. However, by prioritising work-centric needs during full-time working-hours, she performed societally stigmatised selfish full-time working mothering (Figure 1, 2O, 3O). As elsewhere (Pocock 2003; Chesterman and Ross-Smith 2010), she perceived a dearth of support from colleagues (Figure 1, 2Ni) for deviating from intensive mothering, which she ideologically justified on the unselfish grounds of changed financial circumstances and her child's independence (Figure 1, 2Ci), like mothers working flexibly (Section 3.2.6).

When I did come back [from parental leave] part-time then full-time, a lot of people were surprised . . . and I'm sure had opinions . . . which were never shared. [Mother]

Another mother's reversion to flexible full-time hours was driven by organisational contexts stigmatising part-time workers as incompatible with high performance and extreme working (Figure 1, 1J), and normatively obliging employees with time-intensive life-contexts to work full-time hours flexibly (Turnbull et al. 2022).

[I came] back four days a week, took a, 20 per cent pay cut and contributed the same amount I would over a full-time workload. [Mother]

As well as financial and workload penalties requiring long-hours, full-time workloads on reduced remuneration, many participants believed part-time roles had no "challenge", "responsibility" or "career progression", as elsewhere (Thornton 2016; Handley et al. 2017). Although a mother described part-time availability and consequences as "manager-led" and not "consistent" across ComCo, some part-time working mothers had been denied promotions or forced to resign.

Not being promoted as I'm part time, on more than one occasion. [Mother]

Someone recently left because her manager said, 'You either need to go full-time or resign.' . . . [Another colleague] couldn't work in a particular team because the preference was to only have full-time people, and she wanted to work three days a week . . . Her manager said, 'If you want a promotion, you need to up your hours.' . . . And she said, 'I've been at this salary grade for a substantial period of time. I think my capabilities are more than

that.’ . . . And they said, ‘To take that step, you need to go full-time.’ And she wasn’t in a family position to do that. [Mother]

Interestingly, a father believed penalties would be more severe for fathers because they would be deviating from both organisational discourses of “committed” and “ambitious” employees, and societal “norms” idealising breadwinning fathering, supporting Pocock’s (2003) identification of a part-time daddy track.

[As a father] you’d be able to [work part-time] . . . I think it would limit your career . . . It’s so different to what everyone else is doing that it would definitely be noticed . . . I was talking about people that were seen as being ambitious getting promoted. I think suddenly that would be putting family in front of work . . . I would feel nervous doing that if I wanted to continue to grow my career . . . I don’t think [mothers] stand out so much. [Father]

Unsurprisingly, he was aware only of mothers working part-time in ComCo and thought fathers and childless people were “reluctant” to do so. However, a childless woman believed part-time working was not legitimate for childless people, as elsewhere (Wilkinson et al. 2018).

A part-time job is hard enough to get for parents. To take one . . . would suck for people who really need it. [Childless woman]

Such perceptions suggested that penalised part-time workers were overwhelmingly mothers, as in Connell’s (2005) study, reinforcing societal discourses of career-sacrificing caregiving mothers, and breadwinning fathers and childless citizen-workers without non-working lives.

3.1.3. Limiting Working Hours to Approximately Usual Business Hours

A single mother and childless man reduced temporal work–life conflict with a segmentation strategy (Edwards and Rothbard 2000) of scaling back working hours to approximately usual business hours and prioritising life outside business hours (Figure 1, 1A), as elsewhere (Moen et al. 2013; Cahusac and Kanji 2014). However, both made themselves available to work longer hours when “business needs” required. The childless man limited working hours after realising work was becoming “the most important thing” in his life, making him “lose touch” with personal interests and affecting his wellbeing. In doing so, he resisted societal career-focused childless citizen-worker discourses (Figure 1, 4R).

Unlike some partnered parents whose external support enabled them to meet long hours expectations traditionally or flexibly (Sections 3.2 and 3.3), the single mother was “forced” to stop working “at a certain point”. Thus, it was impossible for her to perform not only ideal working, like other single mothers (Christopher 2012), but also intensive mothering by working flexibly around school hours (Hilbrecht et al. 2008), because she could not work at night without partner support (Figure 1, 1E).

It would be easy to do long hours and get sucked into that trap, but maybe being a mum and a single parent is good because it forces me . . . to leave at a certain point . . . I make a conscious effort now, don’t take my laptop home, because then I can’t do it. [Single mother]

Although both participants prioritised life outside business hours, their job-contexts influenced disparate means of doing so. Congruent with Tomlinson’s (2006) findings, the man attributed his ability to limit working hours to feeling “empowered” by his manager’s “backing” (Figure 1, 1M), which he had earned by meeting high performance expectations within business hours (Figure 1, 1K). By avoiding career-damaging poor performance, he also avoided trading off personal aspirations to “excel” and “progress” (cf. Figure 1, 1B). However, some colleagues “noticed” his deviation from long hours cultures and disregarded life-contexts that contributed to his wellbeing as “meaningless” (Figure 1, 1Niii), similar to childless women (Turnbull et al. 2017).

I think it's noticed when you're leaving at a certain time . . . You're not 100 per cent aware of the way people think about it. But you pick up on it in something your manager said to you, 'cause someone said something to your manager. [Childless man]

The mother, whose workload was “ridiculous”, employed a “prioritising” strategy (Moen et al. 2013), but traded off personal “perfectionism” in favour of time for parenting (Figure 1, 1B).

If you're doing something, do it properly . . . But I can't work 24 h a day. So I've just got to prioritise . . . and everything else has to wait. [Mother]

However, deviating from ComCo's expectations of “doing everything” and being “always available” made her feel “a bit guilty” if she left when colleagues continued working after-hours (Figure 1, 1Ci). Although she perceived no career penalties, there were indirect consequences: she had previously resisted “pressure” to apply for a promotion because the manager had “unrealistic expectations about hours of work” (Figure 1, 1J), thus trading off career aspirations to maintain outside-hours life (Figure 1, 1B). Other employees limiting working hours to business hours have experienced mistreatment, career disadvantage and employment termination (Pocock 2003; Thornton 2016).

3.1.4. Containing Excessive Workloads and Working Hours

Many participants reduced temporal work–life conflict by moderately containing “unsustainable” workloads and working hours (Figure 1, 1A), reinforcing the incompatibility of ideal working and life. Like the mother who worked approximately business hours (Section 3.1.3), some participants used time-work strategies (Moen et al. 2013) of “planning”, “restructuring”, “prioritising” or “sharing” workloads and working “efficiently”, but compromised personal standards of doing “everything” and their “best” to contain work's encroachment on time for life and wellbeing (Figure 1, 1B). These strategies were facilitated for some participants by their managers and colleagues' instrumental support (Figure 1, 1M). For others, such strategies were inhibited by knowing ComCo and some managers penalised not “doing everything” with smaller bonuses and salary increases (Figure 1, 1J), or managers who increased workloads and expected “everything to be done” (Figure 1, 1M).

I work more efficiently and accurately to have time for my family. Instead, I'm given more work from other roles . . . with no pay increase. [Father]

Unlike mothers who increased work intensity and efficiency (Cahusac and Kanji 2014; Thornton 2016), this father's efficiency resulted not in reduced working hours facilitating fathering, but “more work” inhibiting life, reinforcing societal breadwinning fathering discourses (Figure 1, 3P, 4P).

Additionally, in the context of ComCo's workload-exacerbating collaboration, relationship-building and career-development expectations (Figure 1, 4I), some participants placed moderate or occasional limits (Moen et al. 2013) on excessive workloads and hours by “saying no” to non-core work or outside-hours meetings, working groups and socialising, which would further impact time for life and wellbeing. As elsewhere (McKenna et al. 2016), a childless man described “saying no” hesitantly, suggesting ComCo's time-intensive expectations could override such strategies.

I'm not sure I fully take advantage of downtimes . . . you get pulled into other things . . . I've learned to be firmer when I need that time. [Childless man]

Similarly, a father's comparative seniority influenced his confidence to “say no” (Figure 1, 1K), like others who passed as ideal workers to higher-status audiences (Reid 2015).

I'm in a position where I feel confident to say no [to late meetings] . . . If it was someone senior, I would definitely make time. [Father]

However, some mothers were constrained to “saying no” because partners' limited caregiving support prevented them from working longer hours (Figure 1, 1E).

There's no way I could [work longer hours] with children and a husband [working in a demanding role]. [Mother]

These participants deviated from ComCo's long hours, availability, relationship-building and career-growth expectations, flowing to direct and indirect career penalties (Figure 1, 1J), as in Brown's (2010) study.

You have opportunities to demonstrate abilities in [late night] working groups . . . But I still have to get up to get children ready and work and be further exhausted. So, I've said, 'I don't want to be on these working groups.' It's certainly impacted my reputation. [Mother]

Similarly, like other parents and childless people (Becker and Moen 1999; Pocock 2003; Lewis and Humbert 2010), a father recognised his working-hour limits would constrain his career aspirations because senior leaders' "enormous" hours were incompatible with "outside interests". Accordingly, participants' "choices" to contain work–life conflict by compromising "above and beyond" job demands, traded off life-contexts such as work-centric challenge and relational needs in favour of balance needs (Figure 1, 1B).

I don't go out as much or hang out after work hours, otherwise I miss [child] for the day . . . I'd prefer to do more. Relationships are so important . . . But it's a choice I make. [Father]

3.1.5. "Stepping Back"

Some women compromised or envisioned compromising work by temporarily adjusting roles to manage parenting responsibilities (Figure 1, 1A). Unlike parents who radically scaled back work by leaving high-demands workplaces (Moen et al. 2013), ComCo's work and career flexibility (Moss et al. 2005) enabled these women to moderately scale back within ComCo (Figure 1, 1I). A mother appreciated shifting into full-time roles "that suited what [she] needed" after parental leave. Similarly, a childless woman envisioned "stepping back" if she had children.

If I have kids, I might decide to step back . . . that could be [a role] which could be done [in] fewer days . . . or more flexibility in what's needed right here, right now. I haven't had much experience in [area enabling flexibility], so that could provide breadth that's good for my career. [Childless woman]

Although these women framed "stepping back" positively, the childless woman contemplated doing so because it would be "difficult" to give her "best" to her "personal and work life". This suggested "stepping back" was a choice constrained by incompatible organisational extreme working (Figure 1, 4I) and societal intensive mothering expectations (Figure 1, 1O) (Lewis and Humbert 2010). Her narrative resembled those of mothers who were grateful, despite stalled careers, that shifting into flexible roles enabled them to temporarily choose good mothering over good working (Brown 2010; Lewis and Humbert 2010; Thornton 2016). Although the childless woman believed "stepping back" would meet personal and organisational career development expectations through "broadening", this implied a career *progression* penalty until she stepped forward again (Figure 1, 1J). As such, "stepping back" traded off career progression aspirations to meet mothering aspirations (Figure 1, 1B).

Men in this research neither "stepped back" to facilitate fathering nor envisioned doing so, as in Miller's (2010) study. In the diametric opposite, a father of a young child made a "deliberate choice" to take a more challenging role that exacerbated temporal work–life conflict, and a childless man envisioned compromising fathering "expectations" to facilitate career aspirations.

It was a very deliberate choice for me when I took the new role . . . I'm a big believer in personal development and learning, and I was doing quite well [in my previous role] . . . I thought, I'd love to challenge myself and learn some new skills. [Father]

Such strategies traded off life-centric fathering aspirations and balance needs to meet work-centric challenge needs (Figure 1, 3B, 4B), which (masculine) extreme work expectations rendered incompatible. Interestingly, the father engaged in no ideological work to justify his career-enhancing but workload-exacerbating choices (cf. Figure 1, 3Cii), suggesting involved fathering compromises can be redeemed by performing other aspects of societally idealised masculinities, such as career success (Bittman et al. 2004).

3.1.6. Using leave

Some participants occasionally used short-term leave, including compassionate, carer's, sick and purchased additional leave (Figure 1, 1A), but only if they "really needed to", to avoid compromising ComCo's workload and availability expectations (Figure 1, 4I). Some childless people felt managers and colleagues instrumentally and affectively supported their use of compassionate leave (Figure 1, 1M).

My manager and colleagues . . . encouraged me to take as much time off as I needed. They supported my workload and constantly checked in. [Childless woman]

Some mothers, and more rarely fathers, took carer's leave if they had "no other option", as elsewhere (Moen et al. 2013). The mothers had "no other option" because they had insufficient working-hours support (Figure 1, 1E), resulting from partners' inflexible workplaces or having no partner. When considering women's greater likelihood than men of single parenting (ABS 2021), or flexibility handcuffs tethering a mother to ComCo in conflict with her challenge needs (Section 3.1.1) while her husband remained in an inflexible but challenging role, gendered parenting practices and constraints underlay some such circumstances, reinforcing societal caregiving mothering and breadwinning fathering discourses (Kirby and Krone 2002) (Figure 1, 1O, 3P, 4P).

[Husband] is in a role that he's really enjoying and really wants to well in it . . . [But his] workplace doesn't have that infrastructure or that culture . . . So, I'm the one who covers sickness, childcare, works flexibly. Whereas he does full-time, in the office, nine 'til five . . . Given the workplace arrangement, it's holding me back from looking for a role outside the business. [Mother]

Nevertheless, some mothers who used carer's leave felt "hugely" supported by managers, particularly given its judicious use (Figure 1, 1M).

When I need to take carer's leave to look after my children 'cause I can't get childcare, [manager's] response is, 'Absolutely, family first'. [Mother]

Despite such support, one mother needed to be "connected" and "available" on carer's leave, while another became "anxious" about her workload "building". Such experiences suggested some managers' support did not extend to covering work, creating workload penalties.

Participants used sick leave even more judiciously than carer's leave, suggesting personal illness was more discretionary than mothers' societally mandatory responsibilities for children's illnesses (Wilson and Baumann 2015). Although a childless man felt able to take sick leave whenever necessary while still meeting ComCo's workload and performance expectations, many participants used sick leave only if they "really needed to" because it compromised their ability to meet job demands (Figure 1, 4I). However, "really needing" sick leave sometimes resulted from work-life conflict impacting health.

I had a breakdown . . . I was overwhelmed with the pressure. I confided in my manager, who gave me time off. However, it should never have come to that. [Mother]

Finally, reflecting societal caregiving mothering discourses, some mothers purchased additional leave because it was "helpful" for managing school holidays.

I purchased a month of annual leave and managed school holidays that way, so that was a real positive. [Single mother]

Another participant's colleagues purchased leave to recover from meeting extreme job demands. Participants who purchased leave perceived no negative consequences (cf. Figure 1, 1J), despite deviating from expectations of being "always available". This may have been because ComCo's policy required employees to ensure additional leave did not conflict with performance expectations (Turnbull et al. 2022). Consequently, a manager and her team experienced workload penalties from needing to meet "unadjusted" targets and workloads over an abridged working year (Figure 1, 1J).

3.2. "Choices" Accommodating Work and Life

Many full-time working participants regularly and substantially (Figure 1, 2A) or occasionally or minimally (Figure 1, 3A) worked flexibly to manage time-intensive work and life demands. Although most participants worked (masculine) long hours to meet quantitative job demands (Figure 1, 4I), mothers, fathers and childless people used nuanced combinations of (feminine) flexible working hours and locations. These time-shifting and time-saving location-shifting strategies tended to negotiate life contexts around work demands without challenging the latter's extent (Moen et al. 2013). Akin to choices facilitating life (Section 3.1), such strategies were not purely temporal, requiring participants to trade-off life and work-centric needs, aspirations and identities (Figure 1, 2B, 3B) and undertake ideological work justifying deviation from organisational, societal and internalised expectations (Figure 1, 2C, 3C).

3.2.1. Regularly Working Flexible Hours

Creating life-work conflict in a company expecting employees to be "always" available (Figure 1, 4I), some full-time working mothers of younger children regularly combined starting and finishing work early and compressed working weeks to manage childcare and school hours and spend time with children (Figure 1, 2A), as elsewhere (Hokke et al. 2019). Another participant knew a father who started and finished work early to "be home for the kids". As in Thornton's (2016) study, despite some mothers having worked over eight hours by the time they "finished early", they "picked up" after children went to bed. However, multiple, incessant, fragmented working and parenting shifts can intensify working and parenting responsibilities to the detriment of other life contexts, including physical and mental wellbeing (Hilbrecht et al. 2008; Toffoletti and Starr 2016).

Unsurprisingly, these "exhausted" mothers' strategies were not unconstrained choices. Hilbrecht et al. (2008) have argued leaving work early to collect children from childcare or school is requisite to full-time working mothers' attempts to perform (albeit compromised) societally idealised intensive mothering (Figure 1, 1O). Multiple working and parenting shifts were necessary to meet ComCo's workload and after-hours meetings expectations (Figure 1, 4I). Limited partner support constrained some mothers to working flexible hours and deviating from business hours availability expectations (Figure 1, 2E). Conversely, a mother with older children acknowledged her lack of inflexible time constraints enabled her to minimise life-work conflict by usually working business hours (Figure 1, 3D) like other mothers who recognised intensive mothering was age-related (Maher 2005).

There's no leeway [with young children]. If you pick them up at five, you can't be there at five-thirty. Whereas if I come earlier or later, it doesn't matter. [Mother]

Not only mothers regularly worked flexible hours. A childless man started and finished work slightly early to engage in wellbeing-enhancing personal interests (Figure 1, 2A). A childless woman started slightly later to manage not being "a morning person" (Figure 1, 2B), but finished substantially later to manage extreme job demands (Figure 1, 4I), leaving little leeway for life on weeknights.

I get in to work at nine-thirty because I'm not a morning person ... 'til six-thirty, sometimes later ... I try not to do anything in the evening because work is just necessary ... Phone calls 'til late ... Back-to-back-to-back all day and night. [Childless woman]

The childless woman felt neither judged nor penalised for starting and finishing late (Figure 1, 2J), reflecting other participants' perceptions of a "late culture" in which employees were "rewarded" for working "late", not "early." However, a mother starting and finishing work substantially earlier felt externally "judged" (Figure 1, 2Ni) and internally "terrible", as elsewhere (Brown 2010; Cahusac and Kanji 2014; Thornton 2016). Like other mothers (Kirby and Krone 2002), she undertook ideological work to "justify" to herself and colleagues that she was meeting ComCo's long hours and commitment expectations by performing online, rather than physical, visibility (Figure 1, 2C).

I feel like people think I'm not dedicated and not prioritising work . . . I feel terrible, but I remind myself, 'You were here at seven-thirty.' And I'll say, 'I'll be back online after dinner'. [Mother]

This mother's perceptions were given credence by a childless woman's empathetic reflections about her past judgement of a flexibly working mother.

Because the meeting ran over, she goes, 'I've got to pick up the children.' I was thinking, 'There's a deadline. You're breaking it because you're female and you're picking up the kids.' . . . Over time I've thought, it could've been the guys who had to pick up the kids. Or maybe he didn't have to because his partner was doing the heavy lifting . . . Why don't we have better facilities so women can put as much effort into things as they want to or ought to? Not that you want women to have to stay crazy hours, but work should be set up so it's possible to do what needs to be done. [Childless woman]

Such narratives suggested ComCo had inadequately adjusted working practices, expectations and cultures to support its flexibility initiative, meaning employees sometimes had to "choose" between life or work, and be judged accordingly (Perlow 1998; Howe-Walsh and Turnbull 2016).

It's a good policy . . . I don't think day-to-day expectations and ways of working have fully embraced it. If there was something urgent at 4.30, I don't think anyone would say, 'Is that manageable for that person who needs to take care of children?' [Mother]

The flexibility backlash suggested by such narratives was not ubiquitous. Some fathers and childless people who felt unable to use flexibility to their preferred extent, neither resented nor judged flexibly working mothers. Like some other childless employees (Wilkinson et al. 2018), they were supportive and wanted flexibility to extend to "everyone" (Figure 1, 2M).

Despite some feeling judged, mothers perceived no negative career consequences for working substantially flexible hours (Figure 1, 2J), contradicting other research (Bittman et al. 2004; Brown 2010; Thornton 2016). This may have been because they met performance, workload, hours and availability expectations by working outside usual hours, reflecting a policy prerequisite making flexibility subject to meeting "business needs" (Turnbull et al. 2022) and redolent of Wajcman's (1998) contention that flexibility was designed to enable mothers to meet ideal worker expectations, not promote work–life balance. Indeed, some mothers linked "confidence" to work flexible hours to "proving" themselves and establishing "trust" by meeting performance expectations, which required adequate seniority or tenure in ComCo or current roles (Figure 1, 2K), as elsewhere (Herman and Lewis 2012; Thornton 2016).

I'd been in the role longer and had a good performance rating . . . I had the confidence to say, "My diary is blocked out from 4 o'clock . . . I won't do it". [Mother]

Conversely, a father and childless man felt substantial temporal flexibility "[hadn't] extended outside mothers", consistent with research (Handley et al. 2017; Wilkinson et al. 2018). One father believed some colleagues stereotyped him as a "babysitter", which can result in fathers' flexibility being viewed as illegitimate because their assumed helping responsibilities are not equated with mothers' assumed caregiving responsibilities (Burnett et al. 2013) (Figure 1, 2Nii). As elsewhere (Handley et al. 2017), another father thought regularly

leaving “before five” would be “noticed” as “different” and “frowned upon” in fathers (Figure 1, 2Nii) and impact fathers and childless people’s careers (Figure 1, 2J), creating flexibility barriers constraining some participants to compromising life.

I’d be uncomfortable to ask to leave earlier every day. I don’t think they could say no, but I don’t think it would help career prospects. [Father]

Such barriers may have been exacerbated by fathers and childless people feeling less constrained than mothers, for example, due to lower societal fathering than mothering expectations (Figure 1, 1O, 3P) or greater external support (Figure 1, 3E), to accept judgements and career penalties (Herman and Lewis 2012) and incessant working and parenting shifts’ wellbeing consequences (Hilbrecht et al. 2008); but more constrained than mothers, for example, by societal breadwinning fathering (Figure 1, 3P, 4P) and citizen-working childlessness discourses (Figure 1, 4Q) to perform extreme working and reject career penalties.

3.2.2. Regularly Working “Flexibly” before or after Work

Some fathers, who relied on partners to manage childcare drop-off and pick-up or paid before and after-school care (Figure 1, 3E), started work “early” during morning commutes or in the office, and worked during lunch and afternoon commutes (Figure 1, 3A) to “justify” leaving at five o’clock to manage long commutes and spend “quality time” with children, as elsewhere (Hokke et al. 2019). When necessary to manage workloads or international calls, they endeavoured to work after children went to bed or on weekends before children awoke; thereby performing organisationally expected long hours and (almost) always available extreme working (Figure 1, 4I) and societally idealised breadwinning and involved fathering (Figure 1, 4P).

I get in by eight so I can leave at five . . . They’re quite flexible on that front. I’ve never felt bad leaving at five. [Father]

Similarly, a childless woman worked long hours with “flexibility” to start early and finish on time to manage work and life commitments.

[I arrive] between eight and nine and leave between five and six, depending on what’s on that day and what I’m doing that night . . . I do have that flexibility. [Childless woman]

The fathers felt managers and colleagues “supported” and “understood” them leaving “on time”, which one felt was aided by being a father (Figure 1, 3M).

It’s an easy reason why I leave at five, rather than having to justify it. [Father]

Contrasts with judgements of mothers working flexible hours (Section 3.2.1) may be explained by mothers revealing their deviation from ideal working by leaving early, and fathers passing as ideal workers by less conspicuously leaving on time, as well as by the sympathy fathers, as assumed ideal workers, garner for spending time with children, compared to the distrust of assumed caregiving mothers (Reid 2015).

3.2.3. Working through Lunch

Many mothers, fathers and childless people (including those working flexible hours, “flexibly” before work, or “late”) “worked through lunch” to manage workloads, avoid “making that up in [their] own time” and maximise after-hours time for life (Figure 1, 2A, 3A).

I’m working and eating at my desk at lunchtime . . . It’s probably just trying to fit too much into a day. [Childless man]

Some such participants traded off life-centric needs for personal time and exercise, or work-centric needs to “enjoy” socialising. However, the latter may have simultaneously inhibited career aspirations by deviating from ComCo’s expectations of relationship-building for “getting the job done” and career progression (Figure 1, 2B, 3B).

3.2.4. “Normal” Flexibility: Regularly Working Remotely

Many participants in roles “that allowed it” (Figure 1, 3L) appreciated regularly working remotely to manage life–work interactions or alleviate work–life conflict (Figure 1, 3A). Participants’ experiences rebutted the beliefs of some employees in other research that remote working facilitated women’s domestic responsibilities and men’s productivity (Sullivan and Smithson 2007). For example, both women and men experienced remote working as a work–life conflict alleviating “buffer”, enabling them to better manage workloads, hours and pressure. For some, this was a secondary benefit of working remotely for life. However, others worked remotely primarily to manage job demands, which reduced their impact on participants’ wellbeing.

I get so much work done. I get on top of things. That de-stresses me. [Father]

Similarly, both women and men worked remotely to facilitate life. Some mothers and a childless man worked from home once weekly to “be there” for children or partners. Some fathers “loved” working at sites nearer home one or two days a week, because it made the “massive difference” of reducing commutes that exacerbated work–life conflict and enabling childcare pickup and “more time for kids in the evening”.

If I’m not working at [usual site], I’ll go to [other site] because it’s . . . [closer to] home. I love that ‘cause I have a bit more time for the kids in the evening . . . definitely on my [childcare] pickup days. [Father]

Like some mothers (Hilbrecht et al. 2008), these fathers performed extreme working and involved fathering by allocating reclaimed commuting time to work and children, not personal interests (Figure 1, 3B). Additionally, some remote-working parents endeavoured to meet both societal parenting (Figure 1, 3O, 3P) and organisational extreme working expectations (Figure 1, 4I) by working after children went to bed, similar to mothers working flexible hours who performed multiple, fragmented working and parenting shifts (Section 3.2.1) and fathers who left work on time to spend evenings with children (Section 3.2.2). However, some remote-working mothers felt unable to satisfactorily perform working or mothering (Figure 1, 3Ci).

I [start] by seven, seven-thirty . . . [finish] five-thirty, six. Spend some time with the kids, have dinner, have a shower, put them to bed, then I usually pick the laptop back up and put another two to three hours in . . . After the kids go to bed if I’m being a really good mum. Sometimes when they’re awake, ‘cause there are deadlines . . . The balance is never right . . . It’s always too much work or I’m running around with the kids . . . I’m guilty on both sides. . . . It’s definitely always a balancing act that I don’t know I ever get perfect. [Mother]

Many parents described ComCo and managers as “accommodating” and “supporting” regular remote working (Figure 1, 3M), which some linked to output and performance (Figure 1, 3K), like mothers working flexible hours (Section 3.2.1).

I wanted to move further away from the office to be closer to my parents [so they could give] the wife and kids extra help through the week. ComCo accommodated by allowing me to work remotely one to two days per week. [Father]

I always work one day from home, so I can be there when they come home from school . . . In terms of how my manager supports me, it’s fantastic . . . [Manager] sees how much I work . . . that I’m self-motivated. [Mother]

In this respect, parents based in head office (Figure 1, 3L) who worked remotely up to two days a week perceived no career penalties (Figure 1, 3J), unlike organisations in which presenteeism prevailed (McDonald et al. 2007; Thornton 2016). A father described working remotely a day week as “normal flexible working” that would not be “frowned upon”. Given participants’ almost ubiquitous refrain of producing higher quality work and being “more productive”, remote working may have been increasingly accepted because it aided extreme working (Perlow 1998), reflecting ComCo’s flexibility for work discourse

(Figure 1, 4I). Participants' productivity emphasis also undertook the ideological work of counteracting life-devotion and re-establishing ideal worker and (among men) masculine identities (Sullivan and Smithson 2007) (Figure 1, 3C). Like mothers working flexible hours (Section 3.2.1), remote workers demonstrated extreme working to others through online visibility and making themselves physically available when required.

However, organisational remote working "support" appeared limited to one or two days a week, and no days at all in some operations, factory and customer-facing sales roles (Figure 1, 4L). Such limits produced not only classed and gendered flexibility barriers forcing "blue collar" employees, in particular, to compromise working-hours life to meet availability demands (Section 3.3.1), but also indirect career penalties (Figure 1, 3J) for geographically constrained participants unable to relocate to other sites or state, national or global offices for promotions (Figure 1, 3H), as elsewhere (Moss et al. 2005). A mother who relied on "all the [grandparental] support we've got around us" to manage her workload and hours (Figure 1, 3E), acknowledged she had "killed her career" because she could not relocate and, although extensive remote working "could be done" in such roles, her manager "liked people coming to the office" (Figure 1, 3M). A single mother who, like other single mothers (Tomlinson 2006), relied on working near home to manage before and after school-care, was ambivalent about a promotion to a role at another site requiring physical availability and a long commute at least three days a week, suggesting remote working was limited to two days.

I spoke to the hiring manager and raised concerns around travel and how that would have to adapt . . . My hesitation is that for at least three days a week, I would need to be in the office, and would have to adapt before-school care . . . but that they're supportive of, whether I start at ten and finish later . . . that's good. But it's still a concern that I'd have to make it work. [Single mother]

Similarly, partnered and single mothers, a childless woman and a father who were unable or unwilling to move overseas because of partners' jobs, elder-care responsibilities or needing or wanting to live near family and friends, foresaw or experienced career "limits," with none considering remote working from Australia despite the uniqueness of online global teams' in ComCo. Research suggests women are more likely than men to experience the family and community-level contexts (Pocock and Charlesworth 2017) that constrained these participants to trading-off career aspirations within ComCo.

Furthermore, remote working for "anyone" was qualified. Some participants thought some managers had "trust" and "control" issues with junior employees (Figure 1, 3K), and some childless people felt remote working was perceived as less legitimate for childless people (Figure 1, 3Ni), as in other research (Wilkinson et al. 2017).

If someone like me wants flexibility, 'He just wants to get drunk and sleep in. You don't have kids. What do you need to be flexible for?' They don't realise it's a mental health aspect as well . . . There's a stigma associated with young men if they want to take advantage of flexibility. [Childless man]

Such perceptions reflected societal discourses of childless citizen workers without non-working lives (Figure 1, 3Q) and irresponsible, immature childlessness (McDonald et al. 2007). They also suggested a flexibility use and abuse discourse policing mothers' flexibility (Kirby and Krone 2002), had expanded with mainstreamed flexibility to childless employees; for example, a childless man engaged in ideological work justifying remote working in conflict with organisational availability expectations and societal childless citizen-worker discourses by emphasising legitimate caring for others rather than illegitimate self-care (Trefalt 2013) (Figure 1, 3Ciii).

My girlfriend isn't working. She's going stir crazy . . . So, it's a day a week from home. [Childless man]

Conversely, a childless woman rarely worked remotely, partly to avoid perceptions of illegitimate remote working. Her reasons also echoed many other participants' experiences

of regular or ad hoc remote working barriers: physical availability was necessary to meet colleagues' needs, attend "back-to-back" meetings and build relationships (Figure 1, 4I).

I don't [work remotely] every week or fortnight . . . Is that because of the way it's gonna be perceived, or because to get my job done it's easier to be in the office? It's probably both.
[Childless woman]

3.2.5. Ad Hoc Working Hours Flexibility

Building on research with parents (Hokke et al. 2019), many parents and childless participants occasionally used flexibility to alleviate work–life conflict while still meeting job demands (Figure 1, 3A). Some participants occasionally worked from home to manage the strain-based conflict of poor mental health, stress and exhaustion resulting from job demands.

If I'm feeling stressed, I just can't go out today, I can make it a stay-at-home day . . . That [flexibility] keeps me sane. [Mother]

Others managed temporal work–life conflict by using informal time-in-lieu, such as a childless man who left work early to offset lunchtime meetings with his manager's support. Additionally, subject to "business needs", many participants occasionally worked flexibly to manage business-hours life responsibilities including appointments, school events and sport.

Dictated by meetings . . . I can leave at 4:30 to [get to team sport]. [Childless woman]

Participants who most commonly used ad hoc flexibility were those who worked most days onsite to manage workload and availability demands. These included childless people, who described few life-contexts interfering with business-hours availability (Figure 1, 3D), and (mostly male) primary breadwinning parents who relied on grandparents, paid care and part-time, stay-at-home or flexibly working partners (Figure 1, 3E) to manage business-hours caregiving responsibilities (Figure 1, 3D). However, by minimally adjusting their working patterns, their occasional flexibility reinforced ideal working (Humberd et al. 2015) (Figure 1, 4I). Unsurprisingly, then, most parents who used ad hoc flexibility felt supported by managers and colleagues (Figure 1, 3M) and perceived no penalties for doing so (Figure 1, 3J), which, like participants who regularly worked flexible hours or locations (Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.4), some linked to their performance and hard work (Figure 1, 3K).

I don't feel bad if I need to leave early. I don't think anyone'd frown on it once they know you work hard and do a good job . . . There's so much work you do after hours. You're always available and logging on. Overall, you probably lose. [Father]

In contrast, although a mother of a child with special needs felt supported by a former manager, her current managers lacked "interest" (Figure 1, 3M) and the flexibility available at ComCo was inadequate for her additional responsibilities, as elsewhere (Cole et al. 2016).

[Former manager] knew that my child had special needs and that there was a lot of stress involved in their care. Sadly, the same type of support would not be offered [by current managers]. The majority don't even know or have not been interested enough to realise the high stress involved in having a special needs child . . . [ComCo] in general is good [with flexibility] but not so much if your children have special needs and you have a limited outside work support system. [Mother]

Like regularly working remotely (Section 3.2.4), childless participants also described conflicting levels of support (Figure 1, 3M), reflecting research (McDonald et al. 2007). Some felt "a bit unsure" about requesting occasional flexibility. Others, who had "earned the right" to flexibility through their "performance", "productivity" and "results" (Figure 1, 3K), felt trusted and supported, particularly by managers with children who had "embraced" flexible working.

Sometimes when you don't have kids you feel a bit unsure about asking for flexibility, [like] leaving early for [appointments], working from home . . . I haven't personally felt this as I've always been lucky to have a great manager who has trusted me and I feel I've earned the right to ask for flexibility when I need it. [Childless woman]

Similarly, some managers, including parents and childless people, who trusted their teams and understood “different” needs, such as “health and wellness”, “working style” and “lifestyle”, encouraged childless employees to use ad hoc flexibility.

I couldn't care less what one person does because I know she delivers . . . She doesn't even need to tell me because I trust her. [Mother]

Such support contrasts with research in which managers without childcare responsibilities, including childless people and fathers with stay-at-home wives, did not support flexibility (Handley et al. 2017). Accordingly, flexibly working managers supporting flexibility for diverse needs may be another benefit of mainstreamed flexibility.

3.2.6. Flexibility Compromises

Despite using different kinds of flexibility, many full-time working participants were constrained by complex individual, family, organisational and societal contexts to compromising working-hours life by not working part-time or limiting their use of flexibility. ComCo's workload, performance and collaboration expectations, requiring “back-to-back” meetings and availability (Figure 1, 4I), made part-time hours or extensive flexibility impracticable or not worth the non-conformance penalties (Figure 1, 1J, 2J) for some participants, as in research with mothers (Thornton 2016).

The high workload, performance and growth expectations conflict with messages about working flexibly . . . How do I get a better result by pulling back a day a week? [Mother]

Although enhancing conformance to organisational expectations, flexibility compromises conflicting with societal discourses could result in colleagues' judgements and participants' guilt, requiring ideological justification (Pocock 2003). Some mothers of younger children worked long full-time hours flexibly to avoid part-time penalties (Figure 1, 1J), but traded off time for children, socialising, themselves and wellbeing (Figure 1, 2B, 3B). These mothers suffered the consequences of performing societally stigmatised full-time working mothering (Figure 1, 2O, 3O), as elsewhere (Toffoletti and Starr 2016); some colleagues judged them as “selfish” or “terrible” mothers and required them to “justify” themselves (Figure 1, 2Ni, 3Ni), and many mothers internalised such judgements (Figure 1, 2Ci, 3Ci).

[Colleague is] horrified I'm a working mother and constantly challenges me . . . He said, 'I don't know how you sleep at night.' . . . Explaining myself, 'I love my children, I'm sure you love your children even though you're not there.' I've got that constant guilt anyway, so when they question you, you think, 'Am I a terrible mum?' [Mother]

Mothers of older children also judged themselves for working full-time (Figure 1, 2Ci, 3Ci), revealing indelibly internalised intensive mothering discourses.

When [child] went through these issues, I thought, 'Is it okay to work full-time, or should I be home and should that be my job?' Of course you feel guilt at times. [Mother]

Accordingly, no mothers ideologically justified full-time work (Figure 1, 2Ci, 3Ci) based only on challenge, relational or wellbeing needs, all of which deviated from selfless intensive mothering (Buzzanell et al. 2005). Like other mothers (Buzzanell et al. 2005; Björk 2013), they emphasised financial constraints (Figure 1, 2G, 3G) and benefits to children, including financial security, future opportunities, modelling “independent” mothering to raise “independent” children, and childcare's contribution to “learning”, “social interaction” and “resilience”. Such justifications reflected not only discourses of intensive mothers' responsibility for children's wellbeing (Figure 1, 1O), but also the neoliberal contagion of breadwinning to mothering (Turnbull et al. 2020).

Sometimes I think, 'Are others seeing me as selfish by focusing on my career? Is that what I should be doing?' But I juggle that with, I just want the best for my children . . . I want them to not be bound by finances and have plentiful opportunities. [Mother]

Multilevel contexts also constrained some fathers to not working part-time or flexible hours and limiting flexibility to remote working and ad hoc flexibility. They thereby passed as organisationally idealised extreme workers (Figure 1, 4I) and societally idealised breadwinning involved (after-hours) fathers (Figure 1, 4P), but traded off personal fathering aspirations that eclipsed societal discourses, similar to other fathers (Bittman et al. 2004). However, these fathers experienced no judgements for passing as compatible involved fathering and ideal working (Dermott 2005; Williams et al. 2013). Colleagues did not judge them for conforming to what one father described as the societal and organisational “norm” of men being “committed” and working long, full-time hours; and “accepted” and “understood” involved fathering outside working hours (Figure 1, 3Niii). Similarly, fathers expressed no guilt for working full-time or outsourcing childcare, reflecting research in which fathers felt involved fathering was possible within tight timeframes (Dermott 2005). At most, some felt frustrated, regretful or guilty that they were unable to collect children from school or childcare to develop “relationships” with educators (Figure 1, 3Cii).

We take them to before school care . . . they go to after school care . . . We don't see their teacher . . . I feel, we feel, guilty. [Father]

Congruent with Björk's (2013) study, these fathers provided various ideological justifications for working long full-time hours with limited flexibility (Figure 1, 3Cii). Reflecting multilevel constraints, these included financial necessity (Figure 1, 3G), children's financial security (Figure 1, 3G), inadequate tenure to request substantial flexibility (Figure 1, 3P), that fathers' part-time or substantially flexible hours would be “frowned upon” in ComCo and “society” (Figure 1, 1Nii, 2Nii) and result in career penalties conflicting with needs for “challenge” and “progression” (Figure 1, 1J, 2J), and a wife's mothering “feelings” and “guilt” (Figure 1, 1O).

Ideal world, we'd both spend less time at work . . . but it means more to [wife] in her feelings as a mother. We couldn't both [work part-time]. We couldn't afford to. [Father]

However, unlike mothers, fathers did not attempt to justify childcare or highlight children's wellbeing, supporting Björk's (2013) contention fathers remain free to justify work based on personal and financial needs in the absence of mothers' responsibility for children's wellbeing. These justifications and omissions reinforced societal-level masculinities configured around breadwinning and career-success (Figure 1, 4P), as well as intensive mothering femininities (Figure 1, 1O).

Finally, some childless people and parents curtailed remote working by working mostly in the office (trading off time for life that frequent remote working would facilitate) for reasons again embedded in multilevel contexts. These including meeting work-centric relational needs (Figure 1, 3B) and ComCo's relationship-building expectations (Figure 1, 4J); counteracting lack of “self-control” and “motivation” at home, which conflicted with ComCo's “productivity” expectations; and, among childless people, avoiding being stigmatised for remote working in conflict with organisational (Figure 1, 4I, 4Niii) and societal discourses (Figure 1, 4Q). Unsurprisingly, childless participants neither felt judged for, nor attempted to justify, usually performing compatible organisational extreme working and societal citizen-working childlessness. Moreover, conflicting with Berdahl and Moon's (2013) findings, but reflecting research in industries prioritising ideal working (Baker 2010), childless women did not feel judged for deviating from societally mandatory mothering. However, a voluntarily childless woman felt some colleagues treated her as a curiosity, as elsewhere (Dixon and Dougherty 2014), and justified her deviation from mothering based on having “never been maternal” and “contributing to the world” through work (Figure 1, 4Ciii), inadvertently reinforcing childless citizen-worker discourses (Figure 1, 4Q).

Many people assume I [have children]. Then they realise I don't . . . I don't see their behaviour changing. I just see that question mark above their heads, 'What does it mean for somebody not to have kids? What box do I put her in?' [Childless woman]

3.2.7. Dedicated Times for Life

Many participants managed temporal work–life conflict with segmenting strategies dedicating specific outside-hours times to life (Edwards and Rothbard 2000), while endeavouring to meet extreme performance and workload demands (Figure 1, 2A, 3A). Many worked traditional or flexible “long hours” during working weeks and “intensely” and “efficiently” while at work to devote parts of their evenings and weekends to life, as elsewhere (Moen et al. 2013; Thornton 2016).

I got to the point where I said, 'I'm not going to work on weekends if possible.' But you were saving up trouble come Monday. I wished I could [work weekends], but if I did, I'd get back to being tired, stressed. [Childless woman]

However, what participants dedicated time to diverged. Full-time working parents of younger children were constrained by their efforts to combine organisationally expected extreme working (Figure 1, 4I) with societally idealised involved fathering (Figure 1, 4P) or intensive mothering (Figure 1, 1O), to devoting most of their non-working hours to being “present” and “connected” with children.

I prioritise family and work . . . social is a fun thing I should have time for only if the other things are under control. And I don't feel like they're ever under control. [Mother]

Congruent with research (Moen et al. 2013; Wilson and Baumann 2015), dedicating most waking hours to working or parenting required “compromises” to exercise, hobbies, friendships and personal time (Figure 1, 2B, 3B) by reducing their frequency, duration and quality, relegating them to the margins of life (such as early mornings, lunch breaks, late nights and commutes) and multitasking, similar to other single mothers (Craig 2005) and parents (Pedersen and Lewis 2012). However, many participants recognised these personal needs were essential to their wellbeing, suggesting such compromises could have severe consequences.

I walk from [station] to work, 15 to, 20 min. Although it's not the type of exercise I like to do, it's something. You make choices. You can't fit everything in. [Father]

I'm up at 7:30 so I've got half an hour to myself before I get [child] up . . . [Child's] asleep by 9 o'clock . . . Nine to 11, getting stuff ready for the next day. Sometimes exercise in front of the television or watching television while I'm doing something else. [Single mother]

Conversely, childless people and a mother of older children, who described few time-intensive external responsibilities (Figure 1, 3D), had more freedom to dedicate their truncated non-working hours to activities aligning with personal preferences and wellbeing, as elsewhere (Pedersen and Lewis 2012; Turnbull et al. 2017).

I'm at the gym once a day. A non-negotiable. And I feel really good doing it. [Childless man]

I still see lots of people. It's just when you work full-time, you can't see people during the week. [Mother]

Regardless of parent-status, dedicated times for life were rarely sacrosanct. Like some mothers (McKenna et al. 2016), many participants used qualifiers such as “try to” or “if possible”, suggesting job demands could override segmentation strategies. Moreover, some managers sabotaged attempts to dedicate times to life (Figure 1, 2M, 3M).

Three or four people left roles [because manager] was unreasonable, calling them on weekends. [Mother]

3.2.8. Communicating Availability Boundaries

Many participants communicated availability boundaries to mobilise managers' and colleagues' support to *not* schedule work commitments at certain times (Powell and Greenhaus 2006) (Figure 1, 2A, 3A). Many participants who regularly (Section 3.2.1) or occasionally (Section 3.2.5) worked flexible hours to manage working-hours life responsibilities, communicated working-hours availability boundaries.

If I have early [commitment] . . . I'll block out my diary. [Childless woman]

Additionally, in the context of outside-hours job demands, some participants who left work on time (Section 3.2.2) or dedicated times to life (Section 3.2.7), communicated after-hours boundaries.

I've outlined why I want to leave at five . . . and don't put meetings afterwards or there needs to be a reason. [Father]

However, participants accepted "business challenges" sometime overrode boundaries and re-established work–life conflict, as elsewhere (Moen et al. 2013).

I said to my manager, 'I know we need to have evening calls. Can we do it on days I've got help or after the children are in bed?' . . . There could be business challenges that prevent you from having those requests met, but he's been quite supportive. [Mother]

Interestingly, many parents' confidence that managers and colleagues would support communicated boundaries conflicted with a childless woman's experience (Figure 1, 2M, 3M), which reflected societal discourses of childless citizen workers without non-working lives (Figure 1, 2Q–4Q).

I said to my manager a number of times, "I like no meetings six to 7:30, because that's when I have dinner." And he would routinely put something in. [Childless woman]

3.2.9. "Planning" and "Organising" Work and Life

Parents of younger children described the necessity of "planning" and "organising" to accommodate working and parenting, such as organising childcare and coordinating overlapping work and life commitments (Figure 1, 2A, 3A). Reflecting research (Hilbrecht et al. 2008), such labour was gendered. Fathers relied on partners' organising labour, regardless of partners' working hours (Figure 1, 3E).

I'm not a big planner. This is when [full-time working partner's] good. We've got a . . . [shared] calendar on our phones, which helps because things change quickly with meetings and where I'm gonna be. [Father]

Conversely, mothers "planned" overlapping work and life responsibilities (Figure 1, 2E, 3E), despite working in demanding full-time roles and one having a stay-at-home partner. Such planning facilitated "functioning" in work and life by alleviating "stress", "pressure", "anxiety" and "exhaustion" produced by "intense" and "unpredictable" work and life demands.

When I'm organised, I'm less stressed . . . You know what's going to happen, when it's going to happen, how it's going to happen. [Mother]

Although a father acknowledged his wife's assumption of responsibility for organising labour may have been influenced by gender "norms", he and most mothers attributed organising labour divisions to the women's aptitudes and the men's lack thereof.

My husband, he's definitely not a decision-maker. He'll avoid it at all costs . . . I'm the decision-maker in our relationship. [Mother]

However, such attributions can embed gendered household labour divisions (Strazdins and Broom 2004) and reinforce societal discourses of caregiving women and mothers supporting breadwinning men and fathers (Figure 1, 1O, 4P).

3.3. “Choices” Acquiescing to Work–life Conflict

Reflecting [Wajcman’s \(1998\)](#) research, ComCo’s (masculine) extreme and (gendered and classed) conformant worker expectations (Figure 1, 4I), and the financial and career rewards for meeting them, and penalties for deviating from them (Figure 1, 1J–4J), constrained many participants (including those who employed strategies facilitating life or accommodating work and life) to sometimes or usually acquiescing to job demands (Figure 1, 4A) and to radically scaling back ([Moen et al. 2013](#)) or trading off ([Barnett 1998](#)) multifaceted work and life contexts (Figure 1, 4B). Such strategies tended to produce not only time and strain-based work–life conflict, but also potential congruence with participants’ work-centric challenge, career and financial needs and aspirations (for meeting organisational expectations), as well as incongruence with other work-centric needs and identities (such as authenticity and socialising) and life-centric identities and aspirations, requiring some participants to undertake ideological work justifying deviation from personal and societal parenting expectations (Figure 1, 4C).

3.3.1. Compromising Business-Hours Life to Meet Job Demands

Consistent with research ([Lewis and Humbert 2010](#); [Thornton 2016](#)), many participants did not use, or compromised their use of, flexibility and leave, thus compromising business-hours life to meet job demands and producing work–life conflict (Figure 1, 4A). Some part-time working mothers worked on days off to manage full-time workload and online availability demands. A mother working flexible hours sometimes “re-juggled [her] whole life” to meet job demands, though longer tenure and high performance increased her confidence to “say no” (Section 3.2.1; Figure 1, 2K). Furthermore, despite some managers’ support for taking leave (Figure 1, 1M), many participants met organisational workload, availability and urgency expectations (Figure 1, 4I) but compromised personal wellbeing and caregiving needs (Figure 1, 4B), by working from home or in the office instead of taking sick, carer’s or compassionate leave, working during carer’s or annual leave, or cutting short carer’s leave.

Say I came down with gastro . . . the guidance would come down from [manager] to rest. But I don’t think I’ve ever claimed a sick day . . . I’m at home working. [Childless man]

However, individual and household-level contexts influenced nuanced strategies. Insufficient caregiving support (Figure 1, 4E) resulting from partners’ inflexible workplaces or having no partner constrained some parents to being “the ones” who worked remotely during children’s illnesses, forcing some mothers’ conformance to caregiving mothering and a father’s deviation from unencumbered working.

[Partner’s] very busy and doesn’t have as much flexibility as me in terms of where to work. [Father]

Conversely, a mother’s early return from carer’s leave resulted both from feeling “anxiety-ridden” from seeing work “mounting up” (Figure 1, 4I) and her compensatory strategy ([Edwards and Rothbard 2000](#)) of working to meet the personal “control” and “achievement” needs that mothering did not meet (Figure 1, 4B). She thereby deviated from societal self-actualised intensive mothering discourses ([Turnbull et al. 2020](#)).

I started to get a bit antsy and [partner] said, ‘Just go back to work’. [Mother]

Unsurprisingly, some managers “never questioned” participants’ management of working-hours life responsibilities to facilitate work, by working remotely rather than taking leave (Figure 1, 4M). However, despite prioritising workloads over wellbeing, some mothers’ managers made them feel “guilty” or “lazy” for working from home during illnesses, as elsewhere ([Thornton 2016](#)).

[Child’s] been ill, I’ve worked from home four days in a row, then I’ve got sick . . . A couple of times my manager asked, ‘Are you coming into the office?’ I’m sure it’s not meant badly . . . but I was new to the manager and trying to prove I wasn’t lazy. [Mother]

This mother's attempt to "prove" herself to a new manager, mirrored other participants' perceptions that junior employees were not "confident" to take sick leave, or that "trust" for using flexibility required adequate tenure (Section 3.2.4; Figure 1, 1K–3K). Moreover, the workload penalties some participants experienced (Figure 1, 1J) because managers failed to cover work (Figure 1, 1M) or because ComCo's "cost-cutting" reduced the capacity to cover absences discouraged others from taking leave.

ComCo has cut to fewer people, so you might not have another person on your team . . . to cover for you during holidays. [Childless woman]

Additionally, some participants believed roles, departments and sites in which employees worked influenced the ability to use flexibility and leave (Figure 1, 1L–4L). As in Sullivan and Smithson's (2007) study, some participants felt "lucky" their roles enabled remote working during illnesses, unlike some working-class and male-dominated operations and factory and female-dominated customer-facing sales roles in which they "need[ed] to be available" to comply with ComCo's "profits" and "targets" focus.

It is clearly communicated the business can offer flexibility, but there is no way to implement this in some roles without losing productivity or sales. [Mother]

Classed and gendered flexibility and leave barriers such as these can constrain working-class employees to performing (masculine) ideal working and inhibit choices to perform caregiving mothering or involved fathering (Williams et al. 2013), resulting in temporal work–life conflict and incongruence with personal identities (Greenhaus et al. 2012) (Figure 1, 4B).

3.3.2. "Going All In" and "Compromising" Outside-Hours Life

Many participants managed workload "peaks" or consistently high demands, and expectations to go "over and above" for career development (Figure 1, 4I), by "going all in" and "compromising" life (Figure 1, 4A), reinforcing ComCo's (masculine) extreme working ideals (Figure 1, 4I).

When I was pregnant, I had terrible morning sickness . . . doing twenty hours a day, going home for a few hours' sleep, coming back and doing it all over again. [Mother]

For many parents and some childless people, "going all in" necessitated not merely multitasking or relegating to the margins of life (Section 3.2.7), but "sacrificing" personal needs such as exercise, eating well and socialising, leaving (albeit limited) time for partners and children, as elsewhere (Pocock 2003; Moen et al. 2013).

During tough periods . . . I cut my enjoyment first. Exercise is the first to go . . . then time to myself, time with my friends . . . I hold on to family time as much as I can. [Father]

Given this father described being a "good" dad, partner and friend, being "sporty" and "progressing" at work as "key pillars" of his identity, such strategies can trade off life-oriented identities as partners, parents, family-members and friends in favour of work-oriented identities and career ambition (which in ComCo required "going all in") (Greenhaus et al. 2012) (Figure 1, 4C).

Finally, some childless participants acknowledged it was easier for them and harder for mothers than "other people" to "go all in" to fulfil "over and above" job demands and be rewarded with "promotions" as a result of mothers' caregiving responsibilities (Figure 1, 1D, 4D), reflecting research (Wilkinson et al. 2018). Such understandings reflected organisationally expected and rewarded (masculine, unencumbered) extreme working (Figure 1, 4I), societal discourses of caregiving mothers excluded from careers (Figure 1, 1O) and breadwinning fathers and career-oriented childless people excluded from lives (Figure 1, 4P, 4Q).

3.3.3. Using “Troughs” for Life

Facilitated by managers’ role modelling and support (Figure 1, 4M), some participants who went “all in” to manage workload “peaks” tried to use “never relaxing” but more manageable “troughs” to engage in life (Figure 1, 4A).

My boss has a good sense of knowing I’m stretched and making sure I have time to recharge . . . [They’re] good at doing that themselves as well. [Childless man]

However, “troughs” reminded one mother she could satisfy life or work-centric needs in ComCo, but not both (Figure 1, 4B). Although enabling her to engage in life, “down periods” did not meet her challenge needs, which were fulfilled during “intense periods” in which she compromised life.

I do have to do a lot of self-talk during those down periods to say, ‘Okay, it’s not the most intellectually stimulating right now, but it gives me the ability to focus on myself, to get some exercise in, and be present with my family . . . ‘Cause those intense periods, while they’re challenging and you feel a huge sense of professional achievement, you compromise all other aspects of your life to be able to achieve that. [Mother]

Unlike many participants’ unquestioning acceptance of excessive hours and workloads based on “business needs”, this mother felt her manager inadequately comprehended her desire for consistently challenging work that could be balanced with personal and family needs (Figure 1, 4M).

[Manager] said, ‘You can’t always be working on big, exciting stuff and having balance in your life.’ . . . Why can’t I have challenging work, the right volume, enjoy personal time and balance family time as well? [Mother]

Conversely, participants who went “all in” to meet consistently high demands had no “troughs” during which to engage in life, which, for a childless woman, produced incessant work–life conflict that “broke [her] health”, as in Pocock’s (2003) research (Figure 1, 4B).

3.3.4. Relying on “Really Good Support Networks”

Unlike some mothers whose insufficient partner support constrained them to deviating from extreme and committed worker expectations by, for example, working approximately usual business hours (Section 3.1.3), containing excessive working hours (Section 3.1.4) or working flexible hours (Section 3.2.1), many participants’ ability to sometimes or consistently go “all in” during and outside business hours required external support for life responsibilities (Figure 1, 4E), as elsewhere (Thornton 2016). Such reliance reinforced (masculine) unencumbered ideal worker discourses (Figure 1, 4I) (Wajcman 1998; Pocock 2003).

You need that support. I don’t know how you’d do the role otherwise . . . as long as you’ve got really good support network. [Mother]

For example, a childless woman whose role required physical availability relied on her husband, who worked more flexibly, to manage veterinary appointments.

If I can’t be there to do these things and he can, then that’s how we manage it. [Childless woman]

Similarly, most parents working traditional hours occasionally or regularly relied on part-time working or stay-at-home partners, relatives, friends or paid care, to manage business-hours responsibilities for younger children, such as after-school care and illnesses.

It’d be difficult to take [carer’s leave] regularly . . . [Part-time working] wife’s taken more. [Father]

Such reliance was the inverse of some mothers’ strategies of adjusting roles or working part-time or flexible hours; to meet business hours demands, a father and mother relied on partners scaling back work, extending on research with fathers (Moen et al. 2013). Similar to other research (Strazdins and Broom 2004) and the mothers who scaled back, these parents framed partner support as a practical consequence of household paid work divisions, their

roles' inflexibility and partners' roles flexibility. However, such circumstances were gendered: the dominant practice among Australian heterosexual couples is full-time working fathers relying on mothers working part-time or flexibly, reflecting societal intensive mothering and breadwinning fathering discourses (Figure 1, 1O, 3P, 4P) (ABS 2017; Turnbull et al. 2020).

In addition, to manage ComCo's workloads, long hours and after-hours meetings, many parents of younger children required not only business-hours, but outside-hours support.

[Colleague has] a babysitter every night, so she can stay in the office until 7 o'clock.
[Mother]

However, some parents' constrained reliance on others produced temporal work-life conflict that reduced time with children, and work-life incongruence with parenting identities (Greenhaus et al. 2012) as well as career aspirations for mothers whose reliance on local support networks constrained them from relocating for promotions (Section 3.2.4).

Conversely, childless participants and a mother with older children were less reliant on support to enable outside-hours availability (Figure 1, 4E), which nevertheless conflicted with wellbeing and time for life (Figure 1, 4B).

I have weeks where I struggle to be there for my family. But the kids are older, so it's not really an issue. [Mother]

Such experiences reinforced societal discourses of childless citizen-workers without non-working lives (Figure 1, 1Q–4Q). However, some childless women felt long working hours resulted in, for example, "husbands who don't get dinner 'til 9pm". Such descriptions suggested these women remained responsible for meals and had inadequate domestic support (cf. Figure 1, 4E), reflecting discourses of caregiving women supporting breadwinning men (Turnbull et al. 2020). However, as dinner time could be compromised, they remained available for work.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This research enriched inclusive, holistic and multilevel theories of multifaceted work-life interactions and strategies (e.g., Barnett 1998; Greenhaus and Powell 2003; Pocock et al. 2012b) by developing an empirical model explicating these perspectives in a unique organisational context: the multilevel continua of gendered and classed "choices", constraints, enablers and consequences for managing multifaceted work-life interactions (Figure 1). At the individual-level, the research demonstrates that employees deploy complex strategies not only to manage time and strain-based conflicts, such as scaling back, segmenting, time-shifting and mobilising social support (Becker and Moen 1999; Edwards and Rothbard 2000; Powell and Greenhaus 2006; Moen et al. 2013), but also to manage needs-based congruence or incongruence between qualitative work contexts and individuals' work-centric or life-centric needs, aspirations, values, qualities and identities, including compensatory strategies (Edwards and Rothbard 2000) and trading off multifaceted work and life contexts (Barnett 1998).

However, the multilevel continua support arguments that individuals' work and life contexts and choices about how to manage interactions between them are mired in gendered and classed household, community, organisational and societal-level power relations (Barnett 1998; Pocock et al. 2012b). By exploring not only mothers, but also fathers and childless women and men's experiences, our research reveals such contexts include continua from constraints to facilitators, and rewards to penalties, aligning with conformance to and deviance from gendered and classed organisational and societal expectations of ideal (extreme and conformant) working, intensive mothering, breadwinning fathering and citizen-working childlessness, which inhibit employees' agency to make genuine work-life choices, despite organisational diversity and flexibility initiatives rhetorically supporting choice (Tomlinson 2006).

Although participants' experiences of the multilevel continua were nuanced within mothers, fathers and childless people, there were broad similarities within and contrasts between them. In summary, mothers of younger children tended to experience multilevel contexts that constrained them to making choices facilitating mothering (Section 3.1), or substantially and regularly accommodating mothering and working (Section 3.2). Such choices endeavoured to negotiate, but could not quite achieve, incompatible societal intensive mothering and organisational extreme working practices (Chesterman and Ross-Smith 2010), and were thus concomitant with organisational-level stigmatisation and penalties for compromising extreme working, colleagues' judgements for compromising intensive mothering and mothers' ideological acrobatics justifying compromises to both. Simultaneously, mothers' choices tended to involve trading off life-centric needs (such as friendships, personal time and wellbeing) and work-centric needs (such as career progression and authenticity) that were incompatible with extreme working and intensive mothering's combined demands (Brown 2010).

Fathers of younger children tended to experience multilevel contexts that constrained them to making choices to accommodate fathering minimally or occasionally within working (Section 3.2). Such fathers adequately passed as compatible organisationally idealised and rewarded extreme workers and societally idealised breadwinning involved fathers (Williams et al. 2013; Humberd et al. 2015), but undertook ideological work justifying compromises to personal fathering aspirations that eclipsed societal discourses. However, fathers' choices required trading off life-centric needs (similar to mothers) and work-centric needs (such as socialising with colleagues, but unlike mothers, not career progression) that were incompatible with extreme working and involved fathering's combined demands (Wilson and Baumann 2015). Mothers and fathers of younger children also experienced golden and flexibility handcuffs that tethered them to ComCo's generous salaries and flexibility benefits and constrained them from resigning.

Mothers of older children tended to experience multilevel contexts that, similar to fathers of younger children, constrained them to making choices to minimally or occasionally accommodate mothering within working (Section 3.2). Such mothers adequately performed organisationally idealised and rewarded extreme working and the less time-intensive societal expectations of mothering older children (Maher 2005), but undertook ideological work justifying compromises to indelibly internalised intensive mothering discourses. Conversely, childless people tended to experience multilevel contexts that constrained them to making choices acquiescing to job demands (Section 3.3), thus performing compatible organisationally idealised and rewarded extreme working and societal citizen-working childlessness discourses. However, the choices of mothers of older children and childless people were similar in two respects. First, external circumstances reduced their reliance on working, enabling choices to facilitate life by resigning or limiting working hours but requiring childless people (not mothers) to ideologically justify ephemeral deviation from organisational and societal citizen-working expectations, or organisational extreme working in the absence of legitimate external responsibilities. Second, their choices did not involve regularly and substantially trading off life-centric needs such as friendships and exercise or work-centric challenge needs, except those whose unrelentingly extreme job demands necessitated trading off ostensibly discretionary health and wellbeing.

These findings extend Pocock's (2003) and Björk's (2013) research to suggest not only mothers and fathers, but also childless people, undertake ideological work to justify to themselves and others their deviation from often internalised organisational and societal working, mothering, fathering and childlessness discourses. In a more practical justification of working and parenting choices, our findings support arguments that parents compromise life-contexts perceived as more discretionary and subjected to lower social consequences and self-flagellation than parenting and working responsibilities that are non-discretionary not only temporally, but also socially and morally according to societal, organisational and internalised parenting and working ideals (Moen et al. 2013; Wilson and Baumann 2015). However, this research expands upon those studies as follows. First,

discretionary contexts include not only time-intensive relationships and activities outside working and parenting, but also personal attributes, aspirations and identities incompatible with qualitative or quantitative working or parenting demands. Second, childless people also trade-off apparently discretionary life-contexts such as wellbeing and socialising to perform non-discretionary extreme working. Third, such contexts are rarely discretionary to maintaining wellbeing. Fourth, flexible working arrangements are complicit in such compromises by obliging “choices” to work flexibly to fulfil time-intensive parenting and unadjusted working expectations to the exclusion of all else (Wajcman 1998; Moen et al. 2013; Toffoletti and Starr 2016).

Finally, this research suggests the multilevel barriers and facilitators to, and consequences of, qualitative and quantitative work–life “choices”, overwhelmingly constrain employees to making gendered choices which reflect and reinforce (Moen et al. 2013) organisationally and societally hegemonic discourses. At the organisational level, constrained choices reinforce ComCo’s worker hierarchies from (masculine) ideal (extreme and conformant) traditional workers through somewhat work-friendly (feminine) full-time flexible workers to subordinated (feminine) workers using progressively more life-friendly strategies, culminating at stigmatised part-time workers (Turnbull et al. 2022). At the societal level, constrained choices reinforce discourses of intensive, self-sacrificing mothers whose mothering responsibilities are compatible with, at most, compromised extreme working, thus excluding them not from work but career progression; and breadwinning, career-focused fathers and childless people expected to uncompromisingly perform extreme working, thus excluding them from non-working lives (Turnbull et al. 2020).

Importantly, these constrained choices reflect middle-classed experiences, including participants’ middle-classed needs and identities as committed, challenged, ambitious and authentic workers (Bailey 2000; Armstrong 2006), and their greater access to flexible working arrangements than “blue collar” employees. However, participants’ observations of “blue collar” roles in ComCo support previous findings that flexible working arrangements are classed (Greenhaus et al. 2012; Williams et al. 2013) by suggesting that, in contrast to middle-classed participants’ constrained “choices”, working-classed employees had little choice but to acquiesce to physical availability demands, forcing temporal work–life conflict and incongruence with life-centric needs and identities.

The research’s limitations include its small, exclusively white-collar interviewee sample and the inability to proceed to theoretical sampling. Nevertheless, the findings were enhanced by contextualising interviewee and qualitative questionnaire data within existing theory and research, which facilitated an understanding of multilevel contexts that underlie and inhibit employees’ agency to make genuine choices addressing work–life conflict and incongruence. Although the findings reflect the perspectives and experiences of the predominantly middle-classed, university-educated, heterosexual, white, English-speaking participants, they may be relevant in comparable organisational and societal contexts. For organisations genuinely wishing to facilitate employees’ work–life balance, this research demonstrates the importance of understanding the multifaceted work and life contexts that produce both quantitative and qualitative work–life interactions and of identifying and addressing gendered and classed constraints and enablers to employees’ preferred work–life strategies, not only within organisations, but also in their broader multilevel contexts. Future research could further enhance such understandings by exploring multifaceted work–life experiences in the contexts of not only gender and class, but also other power relations such as sexuality, race, ability and age.

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