DCPsych thesis

Working mothers and lockdown: a thematic analysis study using the four existential lifeworlds to explore the lived experience of school closures during COVID-19

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Full bibliographic citation: Bazalgette, E. 2024. Working mothers and lockdown: a thematic analysis study using the four existential lifeworlds to explore the lived experience of school closures during COVID-19. DCPsych thesis Middlesex University / New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling (NSPC)

Year: 2024

Publisher: Middlesex University Research Repository

Available online: https://repository.mdx.ac.uk/item/233y8z

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Working mothers and lockdown: A thematic analysis study using the four existential lifeworlds to explore the lived experience of school closures during COVID-19

A Doctorate in Counselling psychology and Psychotherapy (DCPsych)

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Word count: 54103

28/11/24

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Abstract

During the school closures of lockdown, despite the claim in the UK media, not all working mothers returned to the stereotypical ‘1950s housewife’. The current study was undertaken to explore and give voice to the holistic, lived experience of working mothers of primary school-aged children when the schools were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question was “What was the lived experience of working mothers when the schools were closed between March 2020 and March 2021?’. Participants were eight working mothers aged 45-55 with two or more children aged 4-11. Video interviews were conducted on Zoom using a semi-structured approach. The methodology was reflexive thematic analysis. The four existential lifeworlds (physical, social, personal and spiritual) were used to ensure the holistic collection and analysis of the interview data. As researcher, my lived experience as a working mother throughout the study was recorded using a reflexive diary. The parallel sense of being-in-sway between my roles of worker, mother, researcher and student were made visible throughout the study. The overarching theme found was of paradoxes between both challenging and cherishing experiences within their lifeworlds, such as being restricted and free in their physical world, connected and disconnected in their social world, distressed and delighted in their personal world and blending and compartmentalising in their spiritual world. The paradoxes were understood using an existential frame that positions human living as being in contradiction and the constant need to hold these in tension. The concept of paradoxes was extended to include the sense of movement by arguing that the experience of paradoxes in their experience was like a constant movement, which the study names being-in-sway. Contributions from the findings from the study are to support those in clinical practice who see working mothers, organisational work practices to support working mothers and government socio-economic policy for future school closures. Future studies using a grounded theory approach could support and extend further the concept of being-in-sway as a term which can support

an extension of the current literature on working mothers and overcome criticism for focusing on work-life conflict and work-life balance as binary concepts. A more nuanced term, such as being-in-sway, could illuminate further the experience of paradoxes for working mothers and help challenge the dominant discourses of the idealised mother.

Key terms: working mothers, COVID-19, feminism, pandemic, paradoxes, existential lifeworlds, being-in-sway

Introduction

I began this research project as a psychotherapeutic counsellor, a student of counselling psychology (CoP), and a working mother. In the context of the current study, a working mother is defined as a mother who is in paid employment. During the data gathering phase of the research, I was employed as a counselling psychologist in-training working in an NHS secondary care mental health team (CMHT). As I completed my write up, I started a new job with the NHS on preceptorship as a Highly Specialist Counselling Psychologist (in-training) in a newly launched primary care team, the Mental Health in the Community Service (MHICS). Throughout the research process, I was working in a private clinic as a Psychotherapist. Before qualifying as a psychotherapist and starting the doctoral training, I worked in the corporate world for 15 years while being a mother to my two sons. I experienced a never-ending sway of trying to manage my roles as mother, worker and being a working mother. For the last two and half years, I have professionally been moving between the NHS and private practice, and from being a qualified psychotherapist and a trainee in counselling psychology.

My experiences of being a working mother and a therapist led to my keen interest in news headlines about the relationship between wellbeing and work. This started in my first year at Regent's University, London, when I read the publication of Thriving at Work (Stevenson & Farmer, 2017); a report commissioned by the Conservative government to improve mental health at work. Key findings were that the UK was facing a bigger challenge with mental health at work than anticipated. Poor mental health was found to be having a personal cost, impacting society, the economy, the Government, and costing companies billions of pounds due to presenteeism (being at work but struggling) and absenteeism (being off work due to illness).

The experience of being a working mother has received increased attention in the media over the last few years including television series in the UK (Motherland, BBC, 2016-2022) and the US (Working mom's, Netflix, 2017-2023) to the multiple

Oscar winning movie, starring Michele Yeoh in Everything Everywhere all at once (Lionsgate, 2022). More recently the impact of COVID-19 and the experience of imposed lockdowns highlighted the well-documented unequal impact of social policy of lockdown for working mother's. There have been media headlines citing the return of women to being a '1950s housewife' (The Observer, 2020).

Currently, the COVID-19 Inquiry is being conducted under the terms of the Inquiries Act 2005. This is a public inquiry set up to examine the UK's response and the impact of the pandemic (Institute for Government, 2023). I chose this topic and developed a research question which aimed to add to our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on working mother's. I aim to add the body of knowledge around working mother's by hearing their voices and exploring their lived experience during the enforced lockdowns and school closures between March 2020 and March 2021. The combination of the live, current issue of COVID-19 and the well documented unequal impact of social policy of lockdown for working mothers, led me to choose this topic and proposed research question. Consistent with a qualitative and existential approach, I have committed to bending or turning back my awareness of myself (McLeod, 2001) and remained open to my subjective position's impact and relevance throughout this study. Therefore, I have made my experience visible throughout the study (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Being-in-the-COVID-19-world

Verhoef et al., (2020) highlight existential angst and existential themes of the lived experience arising from COVID-19. They describe the COVID-19 pandemic as "a multi-faceted crisis that permeates all aspects of human life and challenges the very nature of our existence (or in Heideggerian terms, our being-in-the-world)" (p. 150). The Novel-Coronavirus-Disease-2019 (COVID-19) was first reported on December 31, 2019. It was considered an existential crisis due to its global threat to life and liberty for humankind (Johal, 2021). COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that causes mild symptoms like the common cold to a more severe disease requiring hospitalisation and death (United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA),

2020). On March 11 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced that COVID-19 was a global pandemic. A pandemic is a contagious disease outbreak among humans on a large-scale (Behl et al., 2022).

On March 23 2020, the first UK lockdown was announced by the UK's prime minister, Boris Johnson. The social policy ordered people to 'stay-at-home' (Institute for Government Analysis (IfG), 2021). The policy of lockdown aimed to mitigate the virus's transmission and reduce hospitalisations and deaths due to the virus. However, lockdown measures meant a loss of liberty and social isolation. The policies prevented people from freely travelling or socialising and led to working from home directives for everyone unless deemed a key worker (retail, health and education workers). In the first national lockdown, people were only allowed to leave home for essential reasons such as buying food or medical reasons (Brown & Kirk-Wade, 2021). The policy of closing schools was initially from March 2020 until June 2020 and only remained open for children whose parents were key workers or for children deemed vulnerable. Although some people returned to work when restrictions eased in May 2020, many workplaces felt unable to meet the stringent COVID-19 workplace guidelines, so most employees continued to work from home. On December 19, 2020, the second national lockdown came into force. Once again, apart from key workers, people worked from home. Schools were closed between January 4 and March 8, 2021 (IfG, 2021). For the five months of lockdowns between March 2020 and March 2021, working parents (except key workers) and their children worked and studied together under one roof.

The lockdowns and school closures were an unprecedented policy in the face of the global pandemic and deemed necessary to try and control the outbreak of COVID-19 and save lives. To illustrate the threat to life, data from February 14, 2022, suggests that over 5.8 million worldwide deaths were associated with COVID-19 (Worldometers, 2022). Currently, there is no agreed definition nor quantification of how each country has recorded deaths associated with COVID-19. Therefore, this cited figure is just an illustration of the threat to humankind, not to be taken as an

absolute figure (Karlinsky & Kobak, 2021). Furthermore, research on COVID-19 and pandemics found there is an unequal effect on men and women which goes beyond being unwell and death rates. Inequality has been linked to the impact of social policies, such as lockdowns and subsequent working from home (WFH), which attempted to control the spread of outbreaks (UNFPA, 2020).

Lockdowns and unequal impact of social policies

Research has demonstrated pandemics have an unequal impact on people, such as those with a disability, lower-income, and ethnic minorities (UNFPA, 2020). Groups such as working parents were found to be most unequally affected by working and schooling at home (Ausín et al., 2020). Gender is also a factor of inequality, with vulnerability and inequality for women increasing during pandemics (Fernández-Luism et al., 2020). The current study aims to understand more about the lived experience of those unequally impacted by pandemics and social policy. . Therefore, due to its limited scope, it aimed to focus specifically on the experience of working mothers during lockdowns, specifically the five months when schools were closed.

Although this study focuses on working mothers, it acknowledges the need for separate studies to look at the lived experience of other disadvantaged working parent groups. In the US, Alon et al., (2020) argue that single working parents were most significantly impacted when having to combine working and parenting roles during the school closures of lockdowns. They concluded that single working mothers were the most severely negatively impacted, this appears to be related to the higher numbers of single working mothers than single working fathers. Iztayeva (2021) found that single working fathers in the US experienced an increase in work family conflict and a decrease in their wellbeing. It was concluded was that these challenges were similar for both single working fathers and single working mothers, and proposed that the uniqueness of single working parents experience during the school closures warrants further investigation (Iztayeva, 2021). Likewise, mothers or fathers who were not engaged in paid employment during the school closures

or were on furlough may have had a different experience and would benefit from a separate study.

Working mothers and inequality

Even before the recent lockdowns, working mothers were responsible for more of the burden of household management and childcare (Chesley, 2017; Manzso & Minello, 2020; Urdinola & Tovar, 2019). On average, working mother's provide 3.3 times more care than working fathers (Addati et al., 2018). Maiti et al. (2020) describe how lockdown has more significantly impacted women due to the stay-at-home directive increasing the burden of their pre-existing multiple roles at home and work. The consequence of closing schools placing an unequal impact of the domestic burden on women is cited across the world (UNFPA, 2020). Wenham and Herten-Crabb (2021) describe the domestic burden during lockdown as including homeschooling, additional cooking, increased housework, and the mental load of managing the household and children. Described as 'unpaid work', this has increased for both men and women but significantly more for working mothers (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Covid inequality project, 2020). Wenham and Herten-Crabb argue that this inequality results from gender norms in society, leading to working mothers taking on a larger share of the domestic strain and mental load. They propose that the gender pay gap (GPG) is responsible for the issue. They argue that GPG means that working mothers are more likely to have a lower income (even if doing the same job as working fathers). Therefore, it reduces their working time to help with childcare. The GPG is the difference in pay between women and men by age, region, part-time and full-time occupation (ONS, 2021). It is a statutory requirement for all businesses over a specific size to report their income data each year to reduce the GPG. Over the last decade, the trend has been for GPG to reduce by approximately 25% each year and currently stands at 7.9% in April 2021 compared to April 2020 (Office for National Statistics, ONS, 2021).

Despite the ongoing GPG, working mothers are the fastest-growing population of returners to work, and the ONS (2017) links this to having 30 hours of

free childcare provided by the government for 3–4-year-olds. In 2019, despite the increasing number of working mothers, one in three working mothers reduced their working hours because of issues in childcare versus only one in twenty working fathers (ONS, 2021). These insights add traction to Wenham and Herten-Crabb's argument about gender norms of working mothers reducing work. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) (2021) cites how increased work-life conflicts for working mothers negatively impact their careers and salaries. As mentioned, the inequality for working mothers was in evidence pre-COVID-19; however, it has become intensified through government social policies, such as lockdown and school closures. Research prior to COVID-19 into being a working mother explored work-family conflict (WFC) and role enrichment (Cooklin et al., 2014); chronic stress for working mothers (Chandola et al., 2019); and work-life integration for working mothers (see Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Criticisms of research into working mothers argue findings have inadvertently supported the binary concept of 'good' versus bad' mother (Elgar & Chester, 2007). These studies are explored in more detail in the literature review.

The current study explored the lived experience of working mother's during lockdowns from a holistic perspective yet remained open to both the binary and the spectrum of their experiences. The impact of COVID-19 on working mothers is cited a move back for women to the 1950s division of household and childcare burdens (Chung, 2020). This messaging of women regressing to a 'housewife' role was a typical headline in the UK newspapers during 2020 and 2021. However, I was open to hearing from working mothers about any experience where working fathers have become more involved in these burdens during the pandemic (Andrew et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2021; Hipp & Bünning, 2020; Yerkes et al., 2020; Zamarro et al., 2020). In addition to the inequality of sharing burdens, there are higher reports of domestic violence against women (EIGE, 2021).

Women and girls are at a higher risk of intimate partner violence (IPV) during pandemics (ISGlobal, 2021), including sexual, physical, and psychological violence

(UNFPA, 2020). The incidence has been reported worldwide during COVID-19 (EIGE, 2021). Cluver et al. (2020) argue that it is harder for women to separate from abusive partners during a lockdown, and the increase in stress and fear during a pandemic leads to an increased threat of IPV. It is clear from past viral outbreaks and the current COVID-19 that the impact of epidemics and pandemics go beyond the experience of just having the virus. Feminists have cited that the COVID-19 pandemic has both positive and negative impacts on the movement towards equality for women.

A feminist perspective

The definition of feminism can vary from person to person (Raina, 2017). Consistent with the current study, I adopted Hooks (2000) simple definition of feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (p. viii). Raina (2017) argues that women have always been placed in a secondary position due to the dominant masculine discourse in western philosophy. However, feminism is not a fixed concept as its meaning has been shaped across generations, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social classes, cultures and nationalities (Hooks, 2017). In her book, *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir (1949) aptly describes the oppression of women as a social construct, arguing “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (p. 13). Therefore, she describes how it is through socialisation into a male dominated civilisation that leads to women becoming the subordinate and oppressed gender.

Feminism in the western world is described as in three waves (Humm, 1992). The first wave was at the turn of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It is most associated with the suffragette movement when women campaigned for the equal right to vote and access to parliament. The second wave, was in the 1960s and was characterised by women fighting for equal legal and social rights. The third wave has been from the 1990s to present day, with social justice campaigns and informed by post-colonial and postmodern thinking. There has been a reclaiming of a right for women to be or wear whatever they choose which has escalated tensions. Third wave feminism seeks to break gender boundaries which it

argues had been enforced by previous feminists. The concept of waves in feminism have been criticised for being reductionist as they minimalise the concept of simultaneous waves across race, ethnicity, class and negates the bravery of women before the nineteenth century (Pasque & Errington Nicholson, 2011).

Ropers-Huilman (2002) outlines that feminist theory has three core principles: women have a valid contribution to make in all elements of the world; they are an oppressed group who have been unable to achieve their potential, be rewarded fairly, prevented from having access to making a full contribution in society; and, that feminist research needs to do more than just critique aspects of equality, but strive towards achieving social transformation. Hardiman et al. (2010) argue that oppression in feminism can be individual (prejudicial attitudes and actions), institutional (unfair policies, laws, rules and norms by organisations, social institutions and governments) and societal/cultural (social norms, roles, rituals, languages that reflect one social group is superior). By focusing on working mothers, the current study meets the three core principles cited by Ropers-Huilman and consider the lens of the different types of oppression cited by Hardiman et al. The study aims to build on the existing literature which highlights that working mothers were unequally impacted by the school closures and the social policy by the UK government which as Wenham and Crabb highlighted did not consider gender.

Working mothers and the social policies of COVID-19

Social policies aiming to limit the spread of diseases such as COVID-19 have an unequal impact on working mothers. Therefore, there needs to be a call for further studies to mitigate these consequences. More research is needed to understand how political policies, such as recent lockdowns and school closures, can have unequal impacts on the genders and is termed a ‘gender-blind’ policy (Wenham & Herten-Crabb, 2021). By analysing minutes from 73 meetings and notes from the COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE), Wenham and Herten-Crabb (2021) found little reference to considering the impact of gender in their response to COVID-19. This gender-blindness is well-documented in the evidence that disease

outbreaks and the attempts to control spread affect men and women differently (UNFPA, 2020). The UK government has a statutory role (Equality Act, 2010) to assess any potential unequal impacts of all policies hence the importance of this study to understand how the lockdown and school closure policy affected working mothers. Inequality of the increased burden on working mother during COVID-19 leads to increased physical and mental ill-health (McClaren et al., 2020).

Rapid assessment surveys from the United Nations (UN Women, 2020) have indicated that the unequal burden on working mothers has led to their increased vulnerability to physical and mental health issues. Therefore, there is an argument for a need to re-calibrate policies to ensure equal opportunity for all to combine work and family responsibilities. Therefore, this study proposes to answer the call to action for research into understanding more about any gender impacts in social policy by exploring the lived experience of working mothers of lockdowns during COVID-19. The following literature review demonstrates that a gap exists in understanding the lived experience of working mothers during lockdowns. In addition, there is existing research into the negative impact on physical and mental health for working mothers during lockdown. Nevertheless, there is no current knowledge exploring the impact of lockdowns on working mothers from an existential perspective using the four dimensions of the personal, physical, social, and spiritual lifeworlds. Therefore, used an existential frame for this study using the four dimensions or lifeworlds of personal, social, physical, and spiritual. These existential dimensions offered an interwoven and integrated framework to explore the experience of being-in-the-COVID-19-world for working mothers during lockdown.

The four existential lifeworlds

As highlighted, COVID-19 is an existential threat to humankind in terms of illness and death and the social policies which have an unequal gender impact on physical and mental health. Deurzen (2021) argues that governments used the term existential threat as a way ensure adherence to lockdown restrictions. Hanaway (2023) argues that the term ‘threat’ is associated with power over another and

that our choices during the pandemic were restricted. The reality of being-in-the-COVID-19-world is that it impacted all aspects of existence, demonstrating a need to understand working mothers experience of lockdowns from a holistic, existential perspective. Using the four dimensions or existential lifeworlds offers a frame to map out life experience (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005) rather than seeing each lifeworld is separate. Binswanger (1946) applied Heidegger's (1962) being-in-the-world to the concepts of the umwelt (the physical world or the physical body), mitwelt (the social world or kinship) and eigenwelt (the personal world or selfhood). Deurzen (1988) added the überwelt representing the spiritual world or worldview. Deurzen (2005) highlights existential themes of human experience such as death and life, weakness and strength, love and hate, absurdity and meaning, alienation and freedom, authenticity and inauthenticity, choice and responsibility, moods and feelings, truth, and deception, good and evil, time and limit situations. Binswanger (1930) spoke of the relationship between the physical, social and personal worlds. When adding the spiritual aspect, Deurzen also speaks of the interconnectedness between the four existential lifeworlds. Existential philosophy explores the paradoxes and tensions in being human rather than seeing conflicts as binary so an either-or. From an existential perspective, distress in human living is seen as inevitable (Deurzen, 2010). The following literature review demonstrates that a gap exists in the knowledge.

Reflexivity

As a researcher, I am a subjective human being who is a psychotherapist, a student of counselling psychology and existential psychotherapy and a working mother. The schools re-opened on the 8th of March 2021, which is International Women's Day and my birthday. Consistent with qualitative research, I acknowledge how my subjective lens of experience has become inextricably interwoven with the current study. This includes choosing the topic and methodology, collecting and analysing the data, and writing up. Therefore, to ensure scientific rigour and meet the study's aims, I have made my own lived experience visible and its influences on the current study. To aid my reflexivity, I began a research diary in July 2021, when I began planning and writing the research proposal for the current study. I have continued making entries throughout the write-up. I have also spoken about the my research in personal therapy and research supervision. I have been motivated and inspired to write in my diary on waking, before sleep, in the middle of lectures, and during my leisure time. Much like the working mother's in the study, my research experience has been about being "always on". I have felt the passion and thrill of working on research, and paradoxically, I have felt demotivated and exhausted like a runner at the end of a marathon who feels like they cannot complete the course.

By keeping a reflexive diary, my role as researcher is clearly illuminated. Like the working mothers, I experienced a perpetual being-in-sway as I have attempted to manage the siege of contradictions in which this research has enveloped me. Initial entries speak of my consideration of quantitative and qualitative research and questioning if their scientific rigour was equal and how would my findings be insightful. This reflection is linked to my being an undergraduate in the 1990s at University College London, and despite having 11 hours of research methods and statistics, we only studied quantitative methods. However, at Regent's University London (RUL), where I completed a Master's and now at NSPC, the emphasis is on qualitative research. Therefore, a paradox in my experience was revealed. Initially, my diary reflects on a sense of feeling "stuck". I became unstuck by reading research

papers and books and allowing myself to sit with the uncomfortable feeling of being unable to progress.

I was able to trust that qualitative research methods and that thematic analysis were the most appropriate way to answer the research question. Using a pluralistic approach, the current study aimed to add breadth and depth to the existing literature. Early entries describe my sense of wanting to 'helicopter in and out' when beginning participant recruitment. I wanted to get the recruitment part over and not interrupt or annoy working mothers. The diary helped me reflect that I was tending to see research as a project with tick boxes and criteria to meet for scientific rigour rather than leaning into it as a process of being a scientist-reflective practitioner. I needed to consider interviewing the working mothers as building a relationship and having an informal conversation. Having a personal therapy session helped illuminate that paradoxes were part of my process, and a personal motivation underpinning the research was a need to be heard as an individual, not just as part of a collective. Personal therapy has helped me understand why equality is essential for me personally and professionally. Therapy helped me explore the influence of the topic in my own lived experience: being parented, being the youngest of five children and being a working mother.

Being-in-the-world: A commitment to equality

As the youngest daughter of five children (two sisters and two brothers), I am driven to have my voice heard and have always stood up for those who may be treated unequally or unfairly. This comes from being so much younger than my siblings. Sometimes it was hard to be heard and seen, but with the conflict of always having four older siblings who have always been a great source of support and inspiration. Being the youngest of the family, I would like to be seen as being an individual and having my unique voice heard whilst also being seen as part of the collective of five siblings and a family of seven. We can be both an individual and part of the collective and have our voices heard in both contexts.

Our family philosophy was that we were human beings first and that, as a

woman, I was equal to any man or woman. Therefore, I had a free choice and the responsibility to take any path I chose. Unfortunately, after having my first son, I experienced firsthand the reality of inequality for Working mother, resulting in my taking (and winning) my employer to court. This was due to the company's unlawful refusal to discuss any flexible working practices and the unlawful recruitment of someone during my maternity leave to do half of my role. Nevertheless, they denied having done so despite a written job description (provided by their lawyers for a prior court case brought against them by another employee)! They abused their role as an organisation in a strong 'Goliath' position in their attempt to discredit my position as the weaker, individual 'David'. Again, there is an example of how, as an individual, I made my voice heard above the collective pressure to keep quiet. However, I know that not all working mother's experience may be shaped by inequality or the prejudice I experienced.

Keeping a research diary, reflecting during and after the interviews, personal therapy, and supervision has helped me bracket my own experiences and helped me understand more about how I understand inequality and equality. The aim of the research was to hear and explore the working mother's lived experiences in their own words, hence the semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis methodology. Therefore, equality is about giving space to lived experience, whether it be the experience of equality or inequality. If we silence those working mothers who have perceived equity, does this not also promote inequality? For example, the article about women returning to 1950s housewives does not allow other women's different experiences to be heard.

Parallel process: Paradox and being-in-sway

The research diary helped illuminate the parallel processes between myself and the participants throughout the study. As mentioned above, the concept of paradoxes was illuminated early in the study, such as when I started the DCPsych and just before the interviews were conducted. In the minutes before the first interview, I experienced a wave of adrenaline through my body. It felt like a mix of

anxiety and excitement about the anticipation of starting to speak to the participant. I reflected on my thoughts and feelings and felt my senses were underpinned by a strong emotion, almost as if I were feeling myself tear up. I felt a sense of joy, relief and some anxiety about wanting to do a 'good enough job' as a researcher. To finally conduct my first interview after 30 years of three accepted research proposals (a PhD in 1994 looking into dyscalculia, and two DPsych proposals in 2018 and 2019 researching around themes of mental wellbeing and the workplace) that never took flight, I was experiencing a swathe of simultaneous, paradoxical emotions. In the study, like me, the working mother's reported paradoxical emotions when the schools were closed.

The working mother's spoke of juggling the demands of working and mothering during the school lockdowns. Like the participants, when the schools were closed, I was also a working mother and studying. However, during the pandemic, my two sons were teenagers. They could independently study and look after themselves, so they did not require the same level of parental input of the participant's with their primary-aged children. My husband is a freelance graphic designer, and as the UK went into lockdown, his clients stopped advertising, so he did not work through the first school closures (SC1). Conversely, my work as a psychotherapist became more in demand, and he took on the main task of handling the domestic load. Therefore, my experience of juggling during lockdown was different from the working mother's in the study,

However, I have reflected that, like them, while transcribing the interviews and conducting data analysis and the write-up, I did these while sitting at my kitchen table. Whilst working on the research, quite often I have been putting the laundry on, so I moved between my laptop and the washing machine. In my professional life, I juggle working in the NHS and private practice, moving between a pluralist psychotherapist and offering CBT in an NHS secondary care psychology team. I juggle between studying and working. Like the working mother's, I am in an "always on" state of the ever-constant movement of holding the tension of paradoxes by being-in-sway.

Keeping a reflexive diary helped me understand that I have been in a parallel

process alongside the research topic and the study participants. The parallel process is commonly referred to in psychotherapy supervision (Clarkson, 2015). It describes the unconscious processes between supervisor and supervisee, therapist and client. Searles (1955) describes the parallel process as part of the reflection process, which seemed most relevant to my experience in the current study. Keeping the reflexive diary, having personal therapy, supervision, and speaking to the research lecturer helped me make the implicit nature of the parallel process explicit throughout the study. Our parallel processes have been an invaluable, integral part of the study. They have become interwoven from its conception to the write-up. The parallel process has helped illuminate my subjective lens of paradoxes and being-in-sway, which has offered a way to help me understand and make sense of the working mother's experience.

Existential psychotherapist and counselling psychologist

Likewise, the research diary helped me to illuminate that I can hold onto the tension of being an existential psychotherapist, a psychodynamic psychotherapist, and a counselling psychologist. Underpinning my practice and theory of being a therapist and psychologist is pluralism; there is no one answer to each question. In the current study, I have held the tension between psychotherapy and psychology by using the four existential lifeworlds as a loose framework to collect and organise the data to explore the working mother's experience holistically. I used thematic analysis to analyse the data. However, my philosophy of human living as existential is evident through keeping my diary and undertaking the research. The philosophy was implicit at the start of the research, but the diary and ongoing reflexivity, both in-action and on-action (Schön, 1983), made it explicit through the paradoxes and never-ending contradictions (Deurzen, 2015) of the parallel process of the participants and me.

To summarise, I will return to the final sentences of the first essay in January 2021, which I wrote at NSPC and mentioned above. I spoke of how becoming a counselling psychologist is like a marathon with many stages. I spoke of the difficulties and conflicts that required reflection, which was not rushed and endured. I concluded

that “Reflectiveness will be my compass to help navigate the predictable challenges and conflicts of becoming a counselling psychologist.”. By being reflexive through the current study, I committed to remaining authentic to that pledge, and allowing it to be my guide has helped illuminate the working mother’s lived experience through the lens’s paradox and being-in-sway.

Literature review

COVID-19: Psychological and Sociological perspectives

The published knowledge of COVID-19 and the understanding of the impact of the socioeconomic policy of lockdown during the pandemic continues to expand frequently. Studies being published looking at the experience of working mothers is ongoing. The current UK COVID-19 public inquiry (Inquiry Act, 2005), is examining the UK's response and impact of the pandemic. The ongoing inquiry highlights how this research topic can contribute to the significant ongoing issue from a socioeconomic, psychological, physiological, and sociological perspective. The current study demonstrates that despite the expanding knowledge and literature on COVID-19, there are still gaps in our understanding. I sought to answer one of these gaps through the research question. To demonstrate this gap, a critical look has been taken at the current literature (as of the 28th of April 2024) from both psychological and sociological disciplines about the COVID-19 lockdowns and the discourse on working mothers. A critical distinction of the current study is the exploration of the lived experience of working mothers from an interpsychological perspective and a holistic being-in-the-COVID-19 world. The term 'interpsychology' was proposed by existential philosopher Merleau-Ponty (2010) and is a term that describes the dynamic relationship between psychology and sociology. Psychology is understanding the individual, and sociology represents the culture and institutions outside the individual and family, such as work and education. In this study, interpsychology is like Heidegger's (1962) term of being-in-the-world, which understands that living is about both the psychological and sociological experiences of the individual. Therefore, the current study argues the four lifeworlds of physical, social, personal (Binswanger, 1953) and spiritual worlds (Deurzen, 1988) offer an appropriate lens to explore the holistic perspective of working mothers. However, as cited before the four lifeworlds are not seen as separate but interconnected. In the current study, psychology explores the lived experience of the working mother, and

sociology offers the context of the family and work.

Working mothers: Being-in-the-COVID-19-world

The current study aimed to explore working mothers and their experience of being-in-the-COVID-19-world, particularly when the schools were closed. Back in 2019, Garland argued that there needed to be more exploration of the lived experience of motherhood using the four existential dimensions of personal, social, physical, and spiritual lifeworlds. However, there is an increasing interest in looking at motherhood from an existential perspective, as evidenced in the book *The Existential Crisis of Motherhood* (Arnold-Baker, 2020). Since the pandemic, feminist-oriented books have been published, such as *Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19 – Dispatches from the pandemic* (O'Reilly & Green, 2021). The book is a series of written and illustrated chapters worldwide of mothers' experiences during the pandemic.

As previously outlined, an ever-growing body of worldwide research highlights the inequality of working mothers during the lockdowns of 2020-2021. The following literature review demonstrates that despite the growing body of knowledge, there currently needs to be more published research exploring the holistic lived experience of working mother's when the schools. The current study uses an existential lens to offer a holistic understanding of lived experience. Such a lens is consistent with the biopsychosocial model of counselling psychology whilst retaining an existential attitude by adding the spiritual context of meaning, values and attitude.

Method

The initial method for the literature review was to use online search engines such as Google Scholar, google and the lesser-known Lilo, which funds social and environmental projects. This was to access literature that offered a context to the research, as demonstrated in the Introduction chapter, and find the most relevant and closest research to the current study. Search terms and combinations included: 'COVID-19 impact on working mothers'; 'working mothers' lockdown'; 'working mothers social isolation measures'; 'COVID-19 working mothers'; 'COVID-19 working

mothers lived experience'; 'COVID-19 structured existential analysis' and 'COVID-19 lived experience'. From the papers and publications found, a snowball approach was then adopted. Over the time the study has been conducted, using this search strategy led to an ever-expanding literature about working mothers and lockdowns. Publications were found from diverse journals and disciplines from across the globe (from psychological, sociological, gender, feminist psychology, psychiatric, medical, and organisational).

As of the 28th of April 2024, using the search terms above, there were 10,800 papers found on Google Scholar. To find relevant papers, a minimum of ten pages of Google scholar was viewed. Using the search terms (and variations of) 'working mothers structured existential analysis'. 'working mothers existential' and 'COVID-19 working mothers lived experience' yielded zero results for research papers. To set the context for the current study, the literature review briefly examines the tensions and paradoxes of the dual role of work and mothering pre-COVID-19. Other studies relevant to the study, but not specifically about COVID-19 or working mothers, include looking at how the memory of pleasant and unpleasant experiences is impacted by time. These findings are relevant because of the lapse of between 18 and 34 months from when the schools were closed and when the working mothers were interviewed for the current study.

Studies about COVID-19 were selected for the literature review because they were the closest research relating to this study so included. Therefore, the studies selected had to include participants who were working mothers with school-age children. Studies worldwide included the UK, Ireland, Israel, Cyprus, the US, Canada and India. The literature review highlighted that despite the plethora of research into working mothers during the pandemic, their lived experience when the schools were closed had yet to be explored using the four existential lifeworlds. The existing literature highlight's themes of 'conflicts' or 'balance'. However, specific research has yet to look at these experiences and themes using the existential lens of paradoxes. Therefore, an existential lens offers a unique holistic perspective to expand the

literature on the lived experience of working mothers during school closures and expand on paradoxical themes previously but not explicitly highlighted. Similarly, the literature review demonstrates that although existential themes of anxiety, uncertainty, death anxiety, freedom and choice were part of the working mother's lived experience of COVID-19, none had been explored from a holistic, existential perspective.

The physical world: The body and being in nature

Working mothers are more stressed

Prior to the pandemic, Chandola et al. (2019) explored how the availability and use of flexible working arrangements can reduce chronic stress. They conducted questionnaire-based interviews and measured allostatic load via blood samples. Allostatic load is a physiological biomarker and index of chronic stress and is "a cumulative measure of wear and tear in several physiological systems" (2019, p. 5). The load occurs when people do not recover from repeated stressors, altering levels of biomarkers associated with stress. (Chandola et al., 2019). A sample of 6,025 participants was drawn from waves 2 and 3, the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) called *Understanding Society*. Started in 2009, the UKHLS is a nationally representative household panel study that recruited over 60,000 adults in 40,000 UK households (Institute for Social and Economic Research et al., 2016).

Chandola et al. state that their study was a deliberate shift away from the Greenhaus and Buetell (1985) psychological model of work-family conflict (WFC), where work and family roles are considered competitive. WFC is explored in more detail in the next section. The Chandola et al. study attempts to distinguish social stress, such as flexible working, from the demands of family life or what they describe as "stress reactions such as depression, low mood and well-being" (2019, p. 4). What they describe fits a sociological model. Their discussion describes the study as "a causal interpretation" (2019, p. 17) of the association between chronic stress and flexible working arrangements. Chandola et al. found associations between role strain (the impact of holding multiple roles) and WFC theories.

However, they did not explore this from a holistic perspective, which is the focus of the current study.

Chandola et al.'s research offers insight into how flexible working hours do not improve a working mother's physiological state. Their findings suggested that working less hours is the only way to correct this. However, there has yet to be any attempt to explore how working mothers reported experiencing this stress, their meaning of having higher allostatic loads, and any associated impacts. The current study aimed to offer an understanding of the lived experience of working mother's themselves during the specific time of lockdown. It seeks to add a psychological and existential aspect to Chandola et al.'s biosocial findings. Work-family conflict and enrichment have been critical variables in understanding working mother well-being from a psychological perspective. Interestingly, the variables of conflict and enrichment offer a paradoxical lens with which to understand working mother's experiences.

Another area that has extensive research is looking at how natural environments (including both urban and countryside green spaces) impact wellbeing (Darcy et al., 2022). Studies have found that being in natural environments improves psychological and physical wellbeing (Cox et al., 2017; Bowler et al., 2010), decreases psychological and physiological stress and can restore cognitive functioning (Staats et al., 2003; Stevenson et al., 2018).

Contact with nature during lockdown

Mintz et al., (2021) explored how having contact with nature (whether actual, visual or remote) during the imposed lockdowns in Israel of COVID-19 benefitted wellbeing. They distributed questionnaires to 776 individuals during the last week of a five-week lockdown in April 2020 when people were restricted to being outside was 100 metres from their homes. The collected demographic information on gender, ethnic and cultural groups, age, income loss due to the pandemic) and considered nature variables (nature near home, nature viewed from home and being in nature the previous day). They also looked at the variable of viewing images of nature

at home. They found that even where individuals had been negatively impacted financially, that viewing images of nature at home reduced their stress levels and improved their emotional wellbeing. Mintz et al. also found that the positive impact of exposure to nature was higher for women, than men.

The Mintz et al. findings have relevance for the current study because it demonstrates the importance of the Physical world, nature, having positive impacts on the wellbeing during lockdown and supports the previous findings that nature can mitigate the negative impacts of stress. The large sample offers scientific rigour to their study; however it was a heterogeneous sample which limits is application to the current study which seeks to explore the lived experience of a particular sample of working mothers. Of interest however, is the gender difference between men and women about being in nature. Likewise, the participants in Mintz et al.'s study were subject to a highly restricted lockdown being only allowed to venture 100 metres from their home. The working mother's in the current study were allowed to take up to an hour's daily exercise with no restrictions on distance from home (apart from what time would allow). Therefore, their experience of being in nature could be distinctly different. Mintz et al.'s study also only looked at psychological and physiological wellbeing, so the participant's experience of personal and physical lifeworlds. The current study aimed to add the social and spiritual worlds as it sought to look at working mother's experience from a holistic perspective. This aim can add to understanding being connected with nature, disconnected with nature and any meaning or meaningless to being in nature (and everything in-between).

Mintz et al. found that participants who had been in nature the previous day, reported only improvements in their positive affect, not on any other measure of well-being. One of their hypotheses was that going into nature during the pandemic could lead to an increased incidental contact with other people which may meant they felt more stressed and therefore, a negative effect of being outside the safety of their homes. They suggested that this could have led to a negative effect of being outside in nature. Another distinct difference to the Mintz et al. study and the current

study is how they view positive and negative affect as “two distinct and independent dimensions” (p. 2). They describe positive affect as how much a person feels “enthusiastic, active, and alert”, and negative affect refers to “subjective distress and pleasureless engagement, that entails aversive mood states such as anger, contempt, fear, and nervousness”. I would argue that this comes from a positive psychology perspective, where there is a focus on positive and negative states and a goal focused on positivity as way to achieve a state of flourishing and avoid any negativity (Lomas & Itzvan, 2016). However, Wong (2011) has criticized this polarisation as unrealistic. Lomas and Itzvan cite how Seligman (1990) described how pessimism can invoke a sense of reality when needed. Despite a move towards second-wave positive psychology, I would argue that the Mintz et al. study is rooted in a view of negative and positive states which is reductionist to the breadth and depth of lived experience which may either-or, both-and plus also. As Lomas and Itzvan state, “negative states can paradoxically be conductive to flourishing” (p. 2). However, second-wave positive psychology is still concerned with a focus on the positive state of being-in-the-world.

A difference in the current study is that it comes from an epistemological and ontological position of being open to the working mother’s experience, and takes a position of Spinelli’s (2005) unknowing to the Working mother’s lived experience. Therefore, the current study does not aim to look at the cause and effect, it remains open to both-and, either-or and the potential for dialectics in human living. Dialectics is the philosophy of how two polar opposing forces interact through being in tension which means that despite being opposites, it is this that binds them together as they both depend on one another for their very existence (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Therefore, it is their “dynamic interplay” which leads to change and evolution between these opposites (Lomas & Itzvan, 2016, p.3). However, despite there being a move towards second-wave positive psychology, the Mintz et al. study comes from a first wave positive psychology position which focuses on the positive and negative affective states of being in nature as being polar opposites.

The personal and social worlds

A paradox of conflict and enrichment

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) examined the literature on the conflict between work and family roles. They suggested that work-family conflict exists when time devoted to a role leads to difficulty in fulfilling the requirements of another role, when strain due to the participation in one role. They propose this causes difficulties in fulfilling the requirements of more than one role, and that the specific behaviours needed by one role led to difficulties in fulfilling the requirements of another. From their study, they developed a model of work-family conflict, which is an extension of Kahn et al.'s (1964) definition of role conflict as the "simultaneous occurrence of two (or more) sets of pressures such that compliance with one could make more difficult compliance with the other" (p. 19). Using Greenhaus and Beutell's model, Cooklin et al. (2014) looked at the impact of work-family conflict and enrichment on the well-being of working mothers when combining work and family roles in Australia. Survey data was collected from 2,151 working mothers of 4-5-year-old children. Work-family conflict was measured using a questionnaire with four items adapted from the Marshall and Barnett (1993) scale assessing employment-related limitations on family life and parenting. A six-item adaptation from the same scale looked at the benefits of combining employment with being a mother, looking at subsections around irritable parenting, parenting warmth, parenting consistency, relationship with a co-parent, maternal psychological distress, and child temperament. Both questionnaires used five measures from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. A higher score indicates more WFC or higher enrichment. The data was analysed using regression models. Their findings suggested that work-family enrichment was beneficial to working mother's well-being. Cooklin et al. suggest that a mother may experience positive benefits through being a working mother. Their findings suggest that spending quality time with their children may become a priority, and the increased income meant that household tasks could be outsourced, which may decrease stress. Additionally, a working mother who experiences high job

satisfaction may have better self-esteem, optimism, and motivation, which supports parenting confidence and competence.

Prinds et al., (2013) and Arnold-Baker (2015) propose that motherhood is entrenched in a paradoxical position of the possibility of creating and nurturing a new life, yet an awareness of the fragility and responsibility for their child's mortality. The global pandemic emphasised this further, with an enhanced focus for new mothers who gave birth during COVID-19 between safety and risk (Arnold-Baker, 2023). I would also suggest the paradox of hope and fear could exist throughout motherhood.

I would suggest that the study by Cooklin et al. adds to the understanding of how the dual role of being a mother and worker can lead to the paradox of conflict or enrichment. Consistent with being a counselling psychologist-in-training who holds an existential attitude, the current study explored working mother's experience using their accounts rather than pre-determined questionnaire data. There was no aim to seek causal explanations such as flexible working hours, stress, enrichment and work-family conflict. The current study privileges an existential lens by viewing conflicts as paradoxes. This approach means that paradoxes are viewed from a dialectic perspective as a way of holding the tension of two opposing forces rather than seeking to solve the conflict. Therefore, paradoxes in lived experience are not to be solved but approached with courage and compassion or what Nietzsche (1886) called 'amor fati'. In addition to exploring the conflict experienced by Working mothers during lockdown, other studies have explored work-life balance during COVID-19. Thomas and Pulla (2022) highlight how work-life balance is a much-researched topic worldwide.

Work-life balance

Thomas and Pulla (2022) highlight that work-life balance can be considered from a conflict perspective but also an absence of conflict. From a conflict perspective, they describe how work-life balance is "a form of friction in which role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respects" (p.77). However, work-life balance can also be experienced with no

conflict existing between the work and home life roles. Conflict in work-life balance is associated with the experience of stress (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 2012; Sachdev, 2021), whereas the absence of conflict in work-life balance can lead to positive aspects such as happiness, skills, abilities, and values in one role being transferred into the other role leading to improvements in the life quality (Singh et al., 2021; Kang & Jang, 2020; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

Thomas and Pulla's (2022) study explored the work-life balance of 305 married working mother's, aged between 25 and 60 years old, living and employed in India in various professions in both public and private sectors. They aimed to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the work-life of working mother's through a social theory and border theory lens. Social role theory considers work-life balance as being able "to succeed in both personal and professional lives" (p.378). Border theory looks at the "daily transition between the borders of family and work, often tailoring their focus, goals, and interpersonal style to fit the unique demands of each (15, p. 751). Border theory argues that to achieve work-life balance, there must be integration, which causes family and work borders to be blurred, which leads to increased stress, depression and a decline in work-life balance (Clark, 2000; Hill et al., 1996). Therefore, Kulaga (2016) argues that compartmentalisation of any issues or emotions is beneficial because it keeps the problems within the context of their origin (home or work). However, during the lockdowns of COVID-19, Thomas and Pulla recognised the blurring of the borders between work and home life. A descriptive research methodology highlighted protective and proximate factors in work-life balance using the definition of an absence of conflict. The data was collected via questionnaires. The Niemeyer et al. (2006) scale was used to measure inter-role conflicts of family-work conflict and work-family conflict and to understand the challenges of the work and family lives of the working mother and, therefore, their level of work-life balance. A Likert scale was used with higher scores demonstrating higher conflicts in both demands, and lower scores indicating low levels of work-life balance. Likert scales were also used to measure support from family work, and

some descriptive questions were asked to understand more about the nature of the support.

Thomas and Pulla found that the dual roles of work within the home space led to work-life balance issues for Working mother during lockdown and decreased their ability to maintain work-life balance. Venkataraman and Venkataraman (2021) highlighted how work-life balance issues included role conflicts and role congestion due to their increased family and work demands. Thomas and Pulla found significantly low levels of support from husbands during lockdown, which they argue is consistent with previous research into Indian patriarchal families (Kotiswaran, 2021). They argue that gender-specific roles of the Indian patriarchal society placed significant pressure on the working mothers in terms of childcare, homeschooling and domestic work. However, where working mothers had support from other family members or their husbands, there was a positive impact on the working mothers' quality of life and their work-life balance which decreased their stress. In their conclusion, Thomas and Pulla highlight that where employers offered greater flexibility in terms of working hours and targets, decreased workload, counselling sessions, technical support and mentoring, this led to an improved work-life balance. Thomas and Pulla conclude that work-life balance can be improved for Working mother with support from their family, husband and employers. They propose this is an essential learning from lockdowns, which can be translated to improving work-life balance now that hybrid working (combining workplace and remote working) is commonplace.

Thomas and Pulla's study highlights some interesting findings regarding work-life balance for working mothers. They demonstrate the challenges of working from home when the lines between work and home are blurred. However, their study is limited to India, which, as they acknowledge, adds a cultural lens of patriarchy and gender stereotypical roles. I argue that the cultural impact limits its relevance to working mothers in the UK. In addition, there was also a focus on the experience of the working mother, where there was an absence of conflict in work-life balance. The current study aims to explore working mothers experience from a holistic, existential

perspective. Looking only for balance is seen as reductionist to the lived experience of working mothers. The current study was interested in all aspects of the working mother's experience during lockdown, such as where there is conflict, an absence of conflict, and anything in between. Adopting a qualitative approach allowed the current study to be open to hearing all aspects of working mother's experience that they chose to share and maintained its commitment to the aim of expanding on the causal explanations that previously dominated the research into working mothers.

Thomas and Pulla do not highlight the emotional experience of the working mother's in trying to manage their work-life balance. Previous research into working mothers highlights a common theme of experiencing guilt in maintaining both work and home life. It is referred to as work interfering with the family and has been demonstrated to lead to experiencing guilt (Borelli et al., 2017). A relevant definition of guilt for working mothers and work-life balance is that a person feels responsible for being unable to meet a moral standard (Baumeister et al., 1994; Tangney, 2003). Therefore, it could be argued that their personal world needs to be explored to fully understand the working mother's experience when the schools were closed.

The personal world: Being a good enough mother

Guilt in motherhood

Borelli et al. (2017) highlight that guilt, like other emotional experiences, is experienced differently. Relevant to the current study, they highlight that guilt can be experienced globally (so across all aspects of life), domain-specific (citing work interference family guilt) or momentary (to a specific experience). A small-scale study by Cummins and Brannon (2021) during lockdowns suggests that for mothers there is a possibility of experiencing guilt across all three areas, as their work and home life merged with the demands of fulfilling a teacher role to their children.

During the lockdown in the US, Cummins and Brannon (2021) recruited 18 women living in the US from private Facebook groups and conducted phone interviews. The women were aged 30 and 40 and included two grandmothers. All were married and had between one and four children, ranging from age 7 to

in their 30s. However, most had children who were five years old or younger. The women were described as primarily working, meaning they had a job and household responsibilities. Their methodology was analysing their words to highlight themes in the women's experiences.

Common themes in their experiences were that they were falling short of the ideal of intensive motherhood where children's needs are prioritised above the mothers. The most common words spoken were "guilt" and "enough". One participant with a 3-year-old son and a 3-month-old baby reported feeling guilty when she became short-tempered with her children. Another participant asked herself if they had "done enough" regarding their meals or opportunities to spend time with her children. Pre-pandemic, most participants reported their number one issue as struggling with time in terms of work-life balance and then being present with the children when at home. One participant reported that the pandemic significantly increased these struggles of motherhood and working. Another participant spoke about the bizarreness during COVID-19 that with more time at home, they still felt like they still did not have enough time when they had to work from home. In summary, there was more time together but less time for themselves. They recognised that the demands of having a full-time job during COVID-19 did not diminish, and now, as a family, there were more of them being in the same living space for extended periods. This led to another theme of a lack of me-time for the mothers.

The reported struggles included the challenge of maintaining a structured day to keep the children occupied, and they found that teaching and working were unsustainable. The mothers spoke about being driven further into intensive motherhood but now with less support from extended family, teachers and childcare providers. Cummins and Brannon argued the lack of support "amplified the struggles mothers faced during the COVID-19 pandemic" (p.229). They concluded that mothers were juggling more during the pandemic, which O'Reilly (2021) described as a neoliberalist move to ask mothers to do more but with fewer resources.

Neoliberalism is a covert political ideology that drives the governmental agenda by putting the responsibility on individuals rather than on the state. Runswick-Cole (2014) uses ‘us’ and ‘them’ to indicate ‘othering’, arguing that neoliberalism in Western politics maintains inequality. Following this neoliberalist theme, O’Reilly (2021) argues that both guilt and shame in mothers is a deliberate policy to ensure that individual mothers feel responsible for succeeding at intensive motherhood rather than placing the blame on socioeconomic policies and the perpetuated sociocultural expectations of being a good enough mother. Cummins and Brannon (2021) argue that having to be a mother, teacher and worker during COVID-19 intensified this feeling of being unable to juggle their responsibilities, which meant they felt like a failure, causing a feeling of guilt.

Cummins and Brannon’s study offers some depth to Thomas and Pulla’s study by offering some insights into the lived experience of mothers trying to juggle the work-life balance when the schools were closed. However, Cummins and Brannon’s study has limitations, which the current study aims to build upon. These limitations are that the sample included both working mother and mothers not in paid employment, but no distinction was made in the findings of each of these two groups. The current study argues that these two sub-groups of mothers had distinctly different experiences given the triple role of mothering, working and teaching when the schools were closed. Therefore, working mother’s and mothers not in paid employment warrant specific research. Likewise, two of the participants were grandmothers, and again, their experience when the schools were closed was different for both working mothers and mothers not in paid employment. Therefore, the current study hopes to build positively upon Cummins and Brannon’s findings by conducting a more scientifically rigorous study on a specific sample group of working mothers, which will then add depth and breadth. One aspect that warrants more understanding is the concept of the idealised mother, and Cummins and Brannon suggest that attaining this was a contributory factor in the experience of guilt.

Good mother ideology

Williamson et al. (2023) highlight that the idealised mother is rooted in "good mother ideology" (p.101) and that women can only be 'good' mothers if they conform to the expectations of dominant parenting discourse, such as intensive mothering ideology which prioritises the needs of their children above their own. Williamson et al. posit that such dominant parenting discourses have been developed across history, religions and cultures (see Arendell, 2000; Chodorow, 1998; Thurer, 1994). In modern times, a good mother is seen as being instinct-led and having an inherent motivation for child-rearing and nurturing (Hall, 1998). The concept of intensive mothering proposes that parenting should be child-centred, emotionally challenging, labour-intensive, and time-consuming, and it should be a task best undertaken by women who are seen as 'expert' caregivers (Hayes, 1998).

Goodwin and Huppatz (2010) describe that the sociocultural traits of being a good enough mother when measured against the idealised mother are perpetuated in social media. This leads to mothers both judging themselves and being judged by others (Chae, 2015). Likewise, Sonnenberg and Miller (2021) argue that maternal self-concept comes from a sociocultural concept of motherhood, which is the goal of being the idealised mother. Elgar and Chester (2007) support this concept of competitive mothering by arguing that existing research into Working mother's perpetuates and reinforces the binary positions of being a 'good' or 'bad' mother. Given that Williamson's (2023) study was conducted over fifteen years after Elgar and Chester's paper, little appears to have changed in the concept of motherhood. Society continues to reinforce the binary position of good and bad mothers. Therefore, the current study argues there needs to be more research into understanding being a working mother from an existential position of understanding their experience as a paradox and holding the tension, not as a way to solve or reinforce the binary of 'good' or 'bad' mothering.

The spiritual world: Good mother, bad mother roles

Being stuck in the paradox

Elgar and Chester (2007) argue that research into working mothers needs to consider their experiences as a complex phenomenon. They specifically comment on how a binary approach focuses on whether the dual roles of worker and mother offer enhancement or benefit (role enhancement hypothesis) or strain or detriment (role strain hypothesis). They argue that this position ignores the complexities of the relationship between the identity and energy of fulfilling these roles. Elgar and Chester allude to, but not explicitly highlight, the paradoxical experience of being a working mother. They use the term binary rather than paradox and argue that research into working mother focuses predominantly on the positives and negatives, which they see as representative of the binary stereotypes constructed by the society.

Johnston and Swanson (2004) describe these binaries in terms of mothering (good versus bad) and work status (employed versus not in paid employment). They suggest these terms are “culturally constructed as rigid binaries” (2004, p. 497). Elgar and Chester argue that these are linked to the perceptions and perpetuation of the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mother. Elgar and Chester (2007) describe how role strain, role enhancement, or work-family conflict research into working mother’s has relied too heavily on quantitative psychological well-being measures as ‘evidence’. They argue that these approaches are underpinned by the cultural and historical frameworks of how women, mothers and working mother’s are viewed as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Elgar and Chester suggest that “the construction of maternal employment on a strictly positive and negative binary does little to account for the complexity of its association with psychological well-being” (2007, p. 6). The binary criticism and subsequent calls from Elgar and Chester support the current study using an existential frame to explore the tensions and paradoxes of being a working mother. The following studies highlight tensions in the dual role of mother and worker in lockdowns, yet none explore them from an existential frame of paradoxes.

COVID-19: Being a mother, a teacher, and a worker

Clark et al. (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 working mothers in Ireland during COVID-19. They aimed to understand the lived experience of working mother's from both work and family perspectives between March and October 2020. A thematic analysis approach and a realistic theoretical framework were used within interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Data analysis was guided by the six steps of Smith and Shinebourne (2012): reading/re-reading (becoming familiar and immersed in the data); coding **(**identifying and coding initial themes), clustering (grouping coding into themes and subthemes), iteration (a back-and-forth process of checking and re-checking themes), narration (telling the story in a narrative form including description and quotations to support themes), and contextualisation (interpreting the themes concerning the existing knowledge). Clark et al. adopted a subjective and reflexive approach by discussing their own experiences and acknowledging how they shaped the data.

Like other research cited in the introduction, Clark et al. found that working mothers were responsible for a disproportionate amount of the burden of having their children at home (caring and educating) and increased domestic demands of the whole household being at home for work and school. Their findings showed how this inequality in the increased burden negatively impacted working mother's psychological well-being and led to an increase in negative emotions and changes in family dynamics. They concluded there was an inequality in the working mother's experience of lockdowns during COVID-19 concerning domestic tasks, childcare, and career advancement. Within the theme of a negative impact on psychological well-being, Clark et al. found that working mother's described experiencing fear, uncertainty, social and physical isolation whilst also trying to support the well-being of their children. Participants also cited the grief and trauma of losing loved ones during COVID-19 and how their additional burdens intensified their experience. The guilt of providing education yet having no experience of the teacher role and isolation due to lost supportive communities were common themes.

Although not explicitly stated by Clark et al., their study highlights existential themes of working mother's lived experience from an interpsychological perspective. These include psychological themes of fear, uncertainty, death, and loss of freedom due to an enforced change from the sociological change of being-in-the-world to being-in-the-COVID-19-world. However, the current study goes beyond just naming themes in Clark et al.'s findings and explored the lived experience of working mothers more profoundly using the philosophy of existentialism and the interconnected four dimensions of lifeworlds. These are described in detail by Deurzen (2005) as the physical dimension or embodiment (sensations, senses, actions, reactions, body, environment, things, other bodies), social dimension or kinship (feelings, relations, belonging, isolation, interaction, ancestors, peers, offspring, future generation); personal dimension or selfhood (thoughts, memories, reflections, dreams, expectations, hopes, fears, identity); and spiritual dimension or worldview (assumptions, values, beliefs, purpose, intuition).

Using the existential lifeworlds offered a structured and holistic exploration of lived experience and a way to consider the individual themes that may arise and the tensions and paradoxes that lockdown may have provoked for working mother. Considering COVID-19 from an existential perspective, using an existential frame offers a structure to take a more profound, phenomenological look into existential themes that Clark et al. found, such as anxiety, health, death, offspring, and isolation. Other studies have explored the biopsychosocial impact of COVID-19 on working mothers in more detail.

Working mothers and intensive mothering: A feminist perspective

Forbes et al. (2021) argue that the expectation of mothering is rooted in cultural norms which remain mostly unchanged despite the significant increase in the labour force of working mothers. Lamar et al. (2019) proposes that being both worker and mother can present a unique set of challenges. Forbes et al. describe how these pressures on mothering exist despite improvements towards gender equality. They cite a feminist perspective that "the expectations of mothers is deeply ingrained in

the fabric of society" (p. 271). Feminism can be understood as a "movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (Hooks, 2000) and challenges inequality. A feminist perspective can be applied to any group experiencing oppression or inequality, not just women. Hardiman et al. (2010) describe how oppression can be experienced from the attitude and actions of individuals, the policy and laws of institutions, and through the social norms of society and culture.

Forbes et al. (2021) interviewed fifteen working mothers aged between 31-55 years old. All identified as heterosexual and cisgender females. Their aim was to explore a holistic understanding of the lived experience of working mothers in the US. Data was collected using semi-structured in-person or telephone interviews. The same ten questions were used for each interview. The questions were about their experiences of the dual role of worker and mother, how they integrate or separate these roles, what supportive messages they receive from family, friends or partner for these roles and any other support for these roles. The data analysis was using Moustakas (1994) hermeneutical phenomenological method. This process involved looking at themes in the data and the researcher's meaning of them.

Their findings highlighted an unrealistic or unattainable goal of reaching the impossible standards of being the ideal mother. Participants spoke about the challenges of juggling multiple demands (both emotional and practical) to be able to succeed in their roles of mothering and worker. They spoke of how even with helpful partners, they carried the main burden of responsibilities for the children and the household. Juggling led to a feeling of being overloaded and was a balancing act which left them feeling exhausted. For example, work emails and phone calls were made simultaneously whilst doing the household chores. One participant described a sense of 'just constantly going on' even before sleep. Some participants described their partners as having equal responsibility, yet also spoke of how without asking for help from their partners, they would have to do things on their own. Participants who had helpful partners described themselves as 'lucky' and to be congratulated for their contribution. To manage the competing demands, the participants described

how they had various strategies to cope with the overwhelm. These strategies were conducted as an internal process by the participants rather than a shared task with their partners.

Forbes et al. utilised a feminist lens to make sense of the participant's experiences. Feminism theory illuminated how they had been influenced by the societal norms of gender roles and intensive motherhood and how these norms are unattainable and costly to their wellbeing. Forbes et al. concluded that despite more women in the workforce and advancements in gender equality, the societal expectations and norms still limit women, and their roles as working mothers. Their findings suggest that working mothers are unknowingly accepting a societal norm of inequality when juggling bringing up children, domestic load and having paid employment outside the home. Like Henderson et al. (2016), their participants spoke of experiencing the guilt and pressure of being a working mother. Therefore, Forbes et al. propose that working mothers continue to be influenced by the concept of intensive mothering and that they must prioritise the needs of their children over their own (Hayes, 1996).

Forbes et al. highlight an important aspect of how for working mothers, the societal norms of motherhood and womanhood have become rooted in our identity. These societal norms of mothering exert an invisible influence, which then unknowingly perpetuates an inequality for working mothers. The current study aimed to build on the lived experience of working mothers by taking a specific look at when the schools were closed. The data will be captured through being open to the participants experience, rather than through ten structured questions designed to explore intensive motherhood specifically. The existing literature highlights how the inequality was intensified for working mothers due to the additional role of teacher being added to their responsibility and demands.

Physical, Personal, Social worlds

Biopsychosocial impact of COVID-19

Hadjicharalambous et al. (2020) examined how working mother's reacted

and responded to the lockdowns of COVID-19. Their study looked explicitly at impacts on their quality of life, health, and resilience. They conducted a quantitative study with 208 working mothers during the lockdowns in Cyprus over ten days in May 2020. Their methodology was a web-based study using The World Health Organisation Quality of Life (WHOWOL-BREF) (WHO, 1998) and the Self-evaluation Resilience questionnaires. The WHOWOL-BREF questionnaire examines the quality of life and looks at physical health (pain, medical, care, energy, fatigue, sleep, ability to work); psychological health (a person's beliefs about life, levels of concentration, body image, self-esteem, frequency of negative emotions); social factors (personal relations, social network, sexual relations); and environment (daily security, hygiene in the living space, financial security). In addition, a Likert five-point scale with scores from 1 to 5 was used to gather data on how the Working mother considered themselves over the previous two weeks. The Self-evaluation Resilience questionnaire looks at themes of perception of self, the grip of one's life, forming relationships, acceptance, optimistic thinking (confidence in the future), orientation in solutions and aims, healthy lifestyle and self-efficacy. A Likert ten-point scale with scores from 0 to 10 was used to gather data.

Data analysis was conducted to compare married and single working mothers' resilience and quality of life, where they lived and their age. In addition, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to investigate any correlations (positive or negative) between resilience and quality of life. The results found that lockdowns negatively impacted the psychological resilience and quality of life of younger working mothers, single working mothers, and those living in rural areas. However, older working mothers, those who pursued activities and hobbies and Working mothers who maintained a higher quality of life were less likely to be negatively impacted. They concluded that the protective and supportive factors for Working mother were family support, working conditions, and job satisfaction.

Hadjicharalambous et al. (2020) offer broad yet insightful findings from a biopsychosocial frame into the experience of working mother's during lockdowns.

A limitation of their findings is that they looked at only data from 10 days of lockdown. In contrast, the current study aims is more longitudinal, looking at working mother experience over five months of UK lockdowns. Researching experience during only ten days offers a snapshot with indicative findings, yet it is argued that their findings are limited due to the specific data collection timeframe. In addition, Hadjicharalambous et al. (2020) looked at lockdowns in general rather than the current study's specific aim, which was to explore the experience of working mother's when the schools were closed. As a quantitative study, Hadjicharalambous et al. aimed to generalise their findings. However, as the authors acknowledge, it was a small-scale study of just over 208 participants, so generalising their findings is limited. The current study builds on and adds breadth and depth to their findings from a qualitative perspective by focusing on a more homogeneous sample of working mothers when schools were closed in lockdown and with tighter exclusion and inclusion criteria for the participants.

One of the challenges of the current study being over a more extended period, and after the schools had re-opened, is the challenge of the working mothers remembering the past. The interviews were conducted between September 2022 and January 2024, so the data was collected between 18 and 34 months after the schools re-opened. Therefore, the current study acknowledged the challenges of a remembered past, and the possibility of school closures being re-experienced and re-told through the lens of rose-tinted spectacles.

A remembered past: Rose-tinted spectacles

The current study explores the lived experience of working mother's during a specific period when the schools were closed during COVID-19. Therefore, their lived experience is a remembered past of the working mother. A remembered past is an oral history method and one of the oldest, most well-known and most used methods in qualitative research (Given, 2008). Oral history aims to gain knowledge from people living during specific social-historical-political periods and events. Therefore, using a remembered past in this study is relevant as it "gives voice to

ordinary and often marginalised people" (Given, 2008, p. 612). However, Keightley (2009) argues that 'remembering research' comes with methodological issues when exploring a specific period or event. As Keightley, describes, memory is a "lived process of making sense of time and experience of it" (p. 55). Therefore, the current study acknowledges that the lived experience of working mother is not an objectively measured historical truth (Kremer, 1999). Consistent with qualitative research, the current study aimed to prioritise the subjectivity of their experience. Therefore, the current study holds the position on lived experience from a temporal perspective that ascribes lived experience of being the working mother's past, present and future.

By taking an existential perspective on time and experience, the current study privileged hearing their stories and so they can never be objectively measured. The current study's position is consistent with Mueller's view that "any flowing interval cannot be preserved in time to serve as a measuring unit" (1946, p. 425). Therefore, although participants explored their lived experience of the five months of school closures, part of any experience they shared was remembered and made sense of through meanings and experiences in their past, present and future. Although existing research highlights inequality as part of the experience of working mothers in lockdown, as a remembered past, it is argued that it is impossible to separate their past, present and future experience of inequality. Therefore, the current study aimed to understand their lived experience of school closures from a subjective position and as "an active reconciliation of past and present" (Keightley, 2009, p. 57).

The current study suggests that bringing together an existential view of time can lead to a remembered past being seen through the lens of rose-tinted spectacles. The definition of rose-tinted spectacles in this current study is seeing or experiencing the past in a positive light, often remembering it as more positive than when having the experience. From an existential perspective, I argue that rose-tinted spectacles can be a way to create meaning and acceptance for a past that cannot be changed, so it offered a way to experience contentment in the present.

My argument is explained more fully by Moore (2021), who describes

how Kant believed in a transcendent realm where we view life through our innate spectacles. These spectacles help us make sense of what we see in the world and help us understand our contributions to the world because it is seen through our own personal view of the world. Therefore, if our innate spectacles are rose-tinted, we will see the world around us and our contribution as being positive. Kant argued that these spectacles are innate. Therefore, how they 'colour' our experience of the world can never removed, so we can never see the world as it is. In this context, whether it is a recent or distant remembered past, it makes no difference, as the innate spectacles will always influence how we experience the world around us. Therefore, our experiences are always in the transcendent realm, which Moore explains as there always is a question of "How are things in themselves? What is the real nature of that reality out there?". These questions can never be hoped to be answered; all we can ever do is speculate on what the answers could be. Moore's explanation brings us back to my suggestion that rose-tinted spectacles are a way to create meaning in lived experience. As Kant proposed, if we cannot see it through our innate spectacles (whether rose-tinted or not), our experience would be meaningless. Therefore, the meaning-making of our remembered past is a fundamental part of our lived experience.

Unpleasant and pleasant memories

Walker et al. (1997) studied autobiographical memory. They aimed to understand how the interval between the event and the remembering was impacted by whether it was a pleasant or unpleasant memory. They describe how common sense tells us that emotions fade over time. Their example is that people who have lost a loved one or experienced failure report that even though the unpleasant memory of the experience can be long-lasting, the intensity of their memory fades over time. To give context to their study, they cite the earlier studies of Holmes (1970) and Cason (1932), which found that negative emotions decrease with more intensity than positive emotions with time. However, they criticise both studies for their one- and three-week retention intervals as too short for autobiographical memory research.

Walker et al. conducted three experiments using differing time intervals of

3-month retention, 1-year retention and 4.5 years retention. In the 3-month experiment, participants were 43 undergraduates in an introductory psychology course at Kansas State University. Participants kept a diary for a 3-month, recording one unique, personal event each day. The event records were collected once each week. Only pleasant experiences were analysed on a Likert 7-point scale of very pleasant to very unpleasant, including a neutral rating in the middle. In experiment 2, the retention interval was increased to one year. The participants were six undergraduates enrolled at Kansas State University. They kept diaries, using the same data collection as in experiment 1.

The findings from both experiments 1 and 2 showed that both pleasant and unpleasant memories fade with time. The emotional intensity for unpleasant events fades faster over time than for pleasant events; and that emotional intensity was the best predictor of event memorability and pleasant events were slightly more memorable than unpleasant events. In experiment 3, there was one participant, a graduate student from Kansas State University and the retention interval was 4.5 years. Over nine months, the student kept the diary the same way as in experiments 1 and 2. In experiment 3, two findings were the same as in the first two experiments. Both pleasant and unpleasant emotions fade with time, and emotional intensity for unpleasant events fades more than for pleasant events; emotional intensity is the best predictor of the event's memorability. However, there were no superior memory ratings for pleasant events, as both pleasant and unpleasant memories were remembered similarly. Walker et al. concluded that emotions are the significant variable in how personal memory fades over time.

Walker et al.'s finding about how memory of pleasant and unpleasant events and their intensity is relevant for the current study. As an important distinction, the current study is open to pleasant and unpleasant remembered experiences, rather than seeing them as Walker et al. as a binary experience of either-or. The current study remains open to seeing memory as either-or, both-and experience and any experience in-between.

Aims and contributions of the study

The specific research question (RQ) was ‘‘What was the lived experience of working mothers during the school closures of lockdown between March 2020 and March 2021?”. The current study interviewed eight participants with the aim of exploring and understanding in more depth their holistic lived experience of being a working mother during the “gender-blind” policy of lockdown and school closures. Modelling past disease outbreaks and COVID-19 predicts more pandemics in the future (Behl et al., 2022). Therefore, it is hoped that the findings in this study are helpful for the individual working mother, organisational and political levels on the impact of lockdowns on working mothers. Insights from the study could have significance at the organisation level as more companies have moved to a hybrid way of working in the office and remotely from home. From an individual perspective, the findings of the current study provides beneficial insights into the experience of working mother’s. These insights can offer some understanding into the supportive and protective factors for any future lockdowns. It is also hoped that the findings provide some insights for clinicians working with working mothers.

Methodology

Epistemology and ontology

The current study used spoken words from participant interviews as the data. This method of data collection is consistent with the aims, research question, epistemological and ontological underpinnings to explore both alternative and expanded perspectives in existing research into working mother and their lockdown experience. It was never a central aim to generalise any findings but to produce some knowledge that "contributes to more general understandings" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 4). Consistent with the counselling psychology philosophy of pluralism, the current study adds to the existing knowledge as an exchange of perspectives rather than to make an epistemological or ontological challenge. The ontology of this study comes from a critical realist position. Critical realism seeks to access real-world knowledge but acknowledges it is situated behind subjective and socially located knowledge (Madill et al., 2000). Subjective and social influence means that the knowledge this study explored can only be partially accessed (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A critical realist position underpins qualitative approaches such as Structural Existential Analysis (SEA), Thematic Analysis (TA), Grounded Theory (GT), Discourse analysis (DA) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

The epistemological framework for the current study is contextualism and means that what can be known is always relative to its context. From a contextualist perspective, this assumes a truth that can be accessed via language, either partially or fully (Madill et al., 2000). Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that contextualism is like critical realism and is "the human act in context" (Tebes, 2005, p. 216 citing Pepper, 1942). Contextualism is a lite version of constructionism (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2015). Joffe (2012) describes this as weak constructionism, which assumes that people's engagement with a particular issue is socially constructed, although there will be a contextual basis. A phenomenological methodology such as IPA could answer the research question focusing on experience. However, the current study used TA as it offered the flexibility consistent with its epistemological and ontological position.

Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that TA is “a fairly accessible method” (p. xxix) which is consistent with my position of novice qualitative research. Likewise, an accessible method is consistent with the aims of the study which is to provide findings which can be applied in diversity of contexts. For example, psychology, sociology, education providers, working mothers, organisations, and policy makers. Braun and Clarke highlight how TA is qualitative method that is often used across social and health sciences and therefore, is consistent with the interpsychological aim of the study. They argue that the crux of TA is to use codes and coding to find themes in the data. However, they argue that this is not a simple method and quote Trainor and Bundon (2020)’s description that TA “simply cannot be simplified; it is a complex and beautiful method with so many options” (p.1). There are different versions of TA, and the current study uses what Braun and Clarke calls reflexive TA because it places a value on the “subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher” (p.1246). Therefore, reflexive TA is consistent with my subjective position of being a counseling psychologist-in-training who is committed to being a scientist-reflective-practitioner (BPS, 2017) both in clinical practice and in research. As previously stated, I have made myself visible by being reflexive throughout the study.

IPA emphasises the interpretation of the data and focuses on discovering the participant’s meanings and experiences (Willig, 2015). An IPA methodological approach argues that it is impossible to have “unmediated access to someone else’s personal world” (Willig, 2015, p. 96). It is only through interpretation that we can access the reality of their meaning or experience. TA is not tied to any specific framework and offers a method that “works both to reflect reality and unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 9). Structural existential analysis (SEA; Deurzen, 2014) was considered as a methodology and from an initial glance presented as a good fit to answer the RQ. However, my conclusion was that SEA as a methodology was in contradiction to my epistemological and ontological aims to produce research which aims to privilege accessibility in its language and approach. This was due to SEA’s use of specific, existential terms (such as

noesis and noema) which are not part of the English vernacular and are likely to be unfamiliar terms for those who have not studied existential philosophy.

The decision to reject SEA as a methodology was rooted in my communication style which privileges simplicity and connection, and to then layer in (as required) the more complicated aspects of being a counselling psychologist and existential psychotherapist. On further reflection, this is because I find unfamiliar terms and overcomplicated language can be anxiety-inducing for myself as I can find them hard to grasp, retain and understand. Historically, using unfamiliar terms and language has been used to yield power (Foucault, 2010) which would feel in contrast to my personal philosophy of challenging inequality. Foucault also argued that 'plain language' in the absence of complication is closest to the 'truth'. His position fits with the epistemological and ontological position of the study which is to hear and understand the Working mother's voice without any additional layers of embellishment, whether that be methodological or analytical.

Therefore, reflexive TA offered my role as researcher in the study to be open to inductive, descriptive, and interpretative positions and allowed an access a 'reality' which allowed the data to inform whether description or interpretation, or both-and as most appropriate for analysis. Being framed through a critical realist and contextualist lens, meant the current study was well-suited to using the four existential dimensions or four lifeworlds associated with SEA to organise the collection and data analysis of the interview data. In summary, the lifeworlds offered a meaningful and holistic frame which allowed me to remain open to other themes and subthemes that were found in the data, during the analysis phase and to organise the findings. Using Braun and Clarke's (2022) concept of a compass, the physical, social, personal and spiritual life words offered a way to organise the data collection and analysis rather than being seen as an integrated map cited by SEA as a methodology. The rationale is that it avoids the possible suggestion that the four worlds are 'separate' and form a rigid structure of experience which then negates the aim of the study as an holistic exploration.

Participants

A total of eight working mother's were interviewed for the study. The sample size is consistent with the recommended size for a medium qualitative research project, such as a professional doctorate (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Braun, Clarke, & Hayfield, 2015). All participants met the following inclusion criteria of the study sample.

- Working mother aged 25-55 years
- Worked from home in paid employment 4 days per week between March 2020 and March 2021
- Two children aged between 4 years and 11 years old and attending primary school during the school closures
- Live-in partner
- Native English speaker
- UK resident

Rationale for Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria related specifically to the period between March 2020 and March 2021.

- Working mother working four or more days in paid employment whilst in lockdown at home
    - The aim is the study is to interview working mothers who are in 'full time' employment. The rationale for including a 4-day work week is that the evidence is there is an equivalent in productivity levels with a 5-day work week (Scientific American, 2023)
    - Working mothers includes women assigned female at birth and transgender women who have children and work

        The rationale for including transgender women is that the current study recognises gender identity rather than gender only being assigned at birth. Therefore, the study is consistent with the Gender Recognition Act (2004) where people can legally change

their gender by applying for a gender recognition certificate.

- Two or more children between the ages of 4-11 years old, living full time at home
    - The rationale for a specific age group of children is to offer homogeneity in the role of the working, mothering and teaching role of the sample. The specific ages represent a homogeneous sample of working mothers of primary school children. Collins et al. (2020) found that working mothers with children under 13 significantly reduced their working hours (more than five times) than working fathers. During school closures, the availability of interactive learning resources decreased with younger children. The ONS (2020) reports that 44% of parents had online resources for 16-18 years compared to 13% for 5-10-year-olds (ONS, 2020). Therefore, I interviewed working mother's with primary school-age children because this age group had less access to interactive learning resources. This lack placed more pressure on parents to 'teach' their children or find ways to occupy them whilst also working themselves, and there was an increase in them having to reduce their working hours. By selecting primary school-age children, this yields richer data as there is evidence of increased pressure on working mothers.
- Cohabitating full-time with a partner
    - The rationale for not specifying a gender of the partner was because the study was exploring the lived experience of a working mother who was living with a partner. The relevant criteria in understanding their experience during lockdown was about having a live-in partner rather than specifying a heterosexual or same-sex relationship.
    - The rationale in not including single working mothers is to create a homogeneity in the data. Single working mothers faced a disproportionate and more significant burden than working mothers

with a live-in partner when the schools were closed (Thibaut & Wijngaarden-Cremers, 2020). Although there may be similarities in their experience, single working mothers were excluded as they would benefit from having a specific study due the evidence which indicates there may be a difference between single working mothers and those with live-in partners during the school closures. The rationale is that the lived experience of single working mother's may yield different findings due to the additional burdens of not having a live-in partner, and therefore could present as a distinct phenomenon from working mothers.

Exclusion criteria.

- Working mothers not living and working in the United Kingdom (UK)
- Not fluent in English
- Children who did not live permanently with them (such as part-time or termly boarding or shared access arrangements).
- Working fathers
- Furloughed working mothers or single working mothers, mothers not in paid employment
- Families who had any kind of live-in help (paid or unpaid)
- Victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)
    - In the participant information sheet, there was an opportunity for working mothers to de-select from taking part if they have been victims of IPV during lockdown. IPV will be defined as any single incident or a course of conduct of physical or sexual abuse; violent or threatening behaviour; controlling or coercive behaviour; economic abuse; psychological or emotional abuse (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021). The rationale is that although IPV has been found to significantly increase in women and girls during pandemics, it has not specifically increased for working mothers. Although IPV may form part of some

Working mother's experience, the current study viewed it as a distinct phenomenon requiring exploration in a separate study. The exclusion criteria formed part of the participant information sheet and was provided as part of the ethics proposal. Despite the opportunity to de-select from the study at this early stage, the issue of IPV as an exclusion criterion was also spoken about in the initial telephone call. No participants reported experiencing IPV during the pandemic. It was understood that relationship difficulties could have been spoken about during the interviews, but with this explicit participant de-selection protocol, the study was designed to specifically exclude victims of IPV. Distress, risk, and safeguarding protocols were in place (see Appendices section). These protocols ensured that if any aspects of IPV emerged at any point during the study that there was a well thought-out plan to be implemented. No IPV was reported during the interviews. Appropriate distress, risk and safeguarding protocols were in place. No such protocols were needed to be implemented (and provided was part of the ethics proposal). If the participants experience meets the IPV definition, their experience would be excluded from the research. If a participant only reveals IPV at the interview stage, with sensitivity, the interview may need to be ended prematurely. An explanation would be offered to each participant about why,-and appropriate support offered. An explicit IPV protocol for this was provided as part of the ethics proposal and to hand during all interviews.

- A working mother who the researcher has a current, direct relationship with.
    - This exclusion criterion avoids any risk of coercion under disclosure or disclosure followed by regret and any impact on the person meeting the researcher in a professional situation later.

Ethical considerations

In addition to the ethical considerations considered as part of the inclusion

and exclusion criteria, the following ethical considerations were applied. The current study mitigated any ethical dilemmas and risks associated with this topic or taking part prior to starting or during data gathering. I remained "ethically attuned throughout the research process" (Willig, 2012, p.52). Therefore, I was aware of any new ethical risks needing attention that could have surfaced throughout the study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008). The current study adhered to and enforced the BPS *Code of Human Research Ethics* (2014). The code focuses on four principles of respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity. I also used my own "psychological and ethical judgment" (BPS, 2009, p. 4,) leaving the participant in the physical, psychological, and sociological state they were found.

In all recruitment materials, initial phone call and at the start of the interview, the participants were made aware that there was no immediate benefit to their participation in the study and that their contribution may help extend the understanding of the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on working mothers. It was explained to all participants that the study's findings could lead to a richer understanding of working mother's experience, leading to potentially more appropriate support and interventions at both the individual, organisational, and social policy levels. The potential risk of talking about personal issues and experiences was stated. Participants were reminded that should this occur, there were procedures in place; such as pausing the interview and discussing whether they would like to continue and ensuring that they receive the appropriate support.

These risk protocols included for any participant becoming distressed or if any safeguarding issues had been raised for either the participant, children or others (see Appendix 1). Safeguarding issues are particularly pertinent with the current study as children are factors in the study, and because IPV against women is increased during a pandemic.

Initial Phone Call

Risk assessment was maintained throughout the initial telephone phone call. This included discussing any concerns that the participant had about the study. I

reiterated the sensitive nature when talking about their lived experience, and they would be given a chance to ask questions. Before the call, the participant information sheet, participant consent form and participant demographic form were emailed to the participants with a request to email back and confirm receipt. The email explained that to protect confidentiality, the call must be made somewhere private, they are safe to talk (so not driving and that the call will be terminated) and that there will be steps to support them if they become distressed. At the start of the call, I checked that the participant was safe to speak privately. As per the exclusion criteria, the participants were sensitively reminded if they had experienced any IPV during lockdowns, they would not be able to take part in this study. An appropriate protocol would have been followed if they answer yes and was provided in full as part of the ethics submission.

Online interview

All participants in the current study chose to be interviewed remotely using Zoom online video conferencing. The participants confirmed they had access to a space offering confidentiality with access to a computer, and internet for remote sessions. There was a protocol discussed that if the signal was lost that I would wait in the virtual meeting room and make contact via the workingmothersresearch@gmail.com email to confirm this is the case.

Confidentiality

The BPS (2014) advises an increased risk in research that may harm employment or social standing. As the topic was around lived experience and work, it was made clear that confidentiality and anonymity was for both the participant and their workplace or organisation. This extended to anonymising any detail that could identify them or link them to a particular workplace and extended to the organisation or workplace. During the study, if there was any risk of serious harm to the participant or others, I explained that confidentiality would need to be broken. Should this happen, I explained that I would endeavour to discuss with the participant the most appropriate next steps to ensure their and others' safety. A safeguarding protocol was provided as part of the ethics submission (Appendix 2).

Respect

As outlined, the current study maintained their privacy and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from the participant to avoid any deception. Respect for what Braun and Clarke (2013) call self-determination are the rights for the participant to choose to withdraw without negative impact for up to one month after data collection. The right and procedure for withdrawal was explained to each participant, including the date up to when this would be possible. As researcher, I maintained an unknowing role and commitment to being a scientist-reflective-practitioner. During the interviews, I was committed to offer a respectful, curious scrutiny of how the lived experience of each Working mother.

Competence

The study adhered to professional ethics outlined by the BPS (2014), maintaining ethical decision-making and working within the limits of competence when conducting this research. All materials clearly stated I was a trainee counselling psychologist and psychotherapist who was conducting this research as part of a practitioner doctorate. Details of the Director of Studies, Supervisor and ethical approval were provided with all materials.

Responsibility

The study committed to ‘do no harm’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013) to any participants. Any risk to the participant was minimised during the interview. Any possible risk was highlighted to the participant; their withdrawal rights was explicitly stated in the participant information sheet, telephone call, and interview debriefing, conducted after the interview. COVID-19 was a period of intense stress for individuals and their families, and I understood that the interview may have provoked distress. The participants wellbeing was always prioritised, and a distress protocol was in place for the initial phone call, interview and provided as part of the ethics proposal. A protocol to cover any safeguarding disclosures was in place and provided as part of the ethics submission (Appendix 2).

Integrity

The study represented all data with an honest account of participants experience.

Therefore, the current study avoided misrepresenting the data collected or the participants and was not plagiarised (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Recruitment and engagement

All participants in the current study volunteered to take part. They were self-selecting participants who heard about the study through mutual connections, direct approaches and through sharing the research poster (Appendix 4) on LinkedIn highlighting the study on a specific women's working group. All contact as part of the on-boarding process was conducted via an email specifically set up for the study (workingmothersresearch@gmail.com). Initially, all participants were sent the information form (Appendix 3) and the research poster (Appendix 4) using the study's email. We then arranged to do a 15-minute telephone call to go through the information about the study, their participation and discuss any concerns or questions about taking part in the study. They confirmed all information had been received and understood and that they met the criteria for taking part. All participants confirmed they met the criteria and returned the signed forms. I highlighted the sensitive nature when talking about their lived experience, that we could pause at any time during the interview and that at the beginning and end there would be given an opportunity to ask questions. I advised that the interview would take around one and half hours, and during this time there would be opportunities for further questions. Consent was given in writing by returning the signed participant consent form. Following the call, I sent a Zoom meeting link via email and confirmed the interview date and time.

Procedure

Data collection

The data was collected by conducting semi-structured video interviews on Zoom. I designed the interview schedule to be an informal experience for both me and the interviewee. I acknowledged that research interviewing is a skill that requires practice. Prior to the data collection, I was interviewed by my personal therapist who is a more skilled peer (Langdridge, 2007) which helped me have a better understanding of conducting a qualitative interview.

Reflexivity

As interviewer, I am a subjective human being who is researcher, therapist and working mother. In the minutes before the first interview, I experienced a wave of adrenaline through my body. It felt like a mix of anxiety and excitement about doing my first interview. I reflected that my thoughts, emotions and felt sense were underpinned by a strong emotion, almost feeling myself tear up. I felt a sense of joy, relief and some anxiety about wanting to do a 'good job' as researcher. To finally conduct my first interview after 30 years of three accepted research proposals (a PhD in 1994 looking into dyscalculia, and two DPsych in 2018 and 2019 researching around themes of mental wellbeing and the workplace) that never took flight, felt overwhelming. Using my counselling skills of self-awareness and bracketing, I used deep, slow, breathing to prepare myself to be a researcher and hear my participant's story whilst acknowledging my subjective self. I had a sense that I wanted to close all applications apart from Zoom down on my laptop to ensure that the interview was an uncluttered space. I noted these thoughts, feelings and felt senses in my research diary. In each of the following seven interviews, I had a similar, yet less intensive emotional rush before the interviews. At the start of interview, I thanked the participants, and reminded them that the interview would last no longer than one and half hours and that we could pause or stop at any time (for any reason). I reiterated the confidential nature of their participation in the study. I reminded them that the interview would be recorded via audio and video, and transcribed by myself. Six of

the interviews lasted up to hour and a half. Two interviews were around an hour as the working mothers explained they had a meeting to attend. We agreed an earlier stop time and in reality, the interview felt like it came to a natural end.

Consistent with the aims of the study, I committed to being open to the lived experience of the working mother's. Therefore, I used a semi-structured approach to the interviews to facilitate a conversational tone. This allowed the interviews to be informal and that data collection happened "in the light of the conversation" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 65) with the interviewees. To facilitate this, I created a crib sheet for myself (Appendix 5) and started each interview with an open-ended initial question: "So, thinking back to the school closures (Mar-June 2020; Jan-Mar 2021) and you were a working mother at home, what can you tell me about your experience during this time?".

All participants began describing their experiences when the school's closed without any further prompting. I had prepared some prompts to encourage the participants to speak holistically experience using the four dimensions. However, I did not use any semi-structured questions as prompts to ask about their personal, physical, social or spiritual worlds. To ensure that I was hearing about their lived experience holistically, I created a table with headers for each of the four lifeworld's and kept a tally in each quadrant about when each working mother spoke about their experience. This allowed the interviews to progress naturally. All interviews remained unstructured because the participants spoke openly and fluidly, with limited input from myself about their experiences in each of the four lifeworlds.

Occasionally, I used counselling skills advocated by Langdridge (2007) such as prompts and encouragers, ('yes', 'go on', 'tell me more' etc.) to invite them to open up with more detail. I used the skills of active listening, and attunement to hear the experience from their perspective, and used a conversational style which allowed the collaborative exploration between myself and the participant's lived experience. I ensured that there was a clear distinction in my role as researcher, rather than therapist who was collaboratively working in-session with a client for therapeutic

benefit. For example, as researcher, I was collaboratively exploring the participant's experiences without any specific goal for the interview except beyond hearing their experience and collecting data for the purpose of answering the research question. Throughout, and even before, the interviews, I was committed to in-action reflection (so whilst the data was being collected) noting any thoughts, feelings, or embodied felt sense.

At the end of the interview, I thanked the participant's for taking part. I asked if they had anything else that they would like to tell me about their experience of being a working mother during school closures, or if there were any further questions about the research. The interviews ended with the debriefing protocol (Appendix 6) which included asking if they would like a copy of the findings and giving an approximate date of Spring 2024 for the thesis being completed; advised of their right to withdraw and the timings; and, re-outlined confidentiality. I offered information on further support available if they wanted to talk more about their experiences and advised they could contact myself or my supervisor at any point following the interview. The interview closed with me thanking them once again for taking part.

Immediately after the interview, I made post-interview notes about any thoughts, emotions, felt sense and reflections in my research diary. The purpose was to allow space for me to hear the participants experiences whilst not ignoring my own in-action reflections. For on-action reflection, I reflected these notes with my research supervisor to increase my reflexivity with the data collection.

Data analysis

Consistent with TA, an iterative process was used throughout the data analysis of referring to the topic, research question, raw data, themes, and analysis using triangulation in my personal therapy and research supervision. I was committed to the iterative nature of qualitative research and ensured that data analysis continued during the writing up (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To maintain my trustworthiness and scientific rigour, I followed Tobin & Begley's (2004) four parameters in qualitative research: *credibility* (to ensure there is a good fit between

the researchers and respondents' views); *transferability* (thick descriptions will ensure generalisability of inquiry on a case by case basis); *dependability* (to ensure the research process will be logical, traceable and documented); and *confirmability* (ensuring the interpretations and findings come from the data via demonstrating how conclusions have been reached).

To demonstrate my commitment to trustworthiness, I used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) six-phase approach (see appendix 7) A pilot study was conducted using the data from the first interview and using their six-phase approach. Whilst the pilot study was being written up, the other seven interviews were conducted over a period of 15 months. The pilot study was invaluable in testing, adapting and becoming familiar with Lincoln and Guba's six-phase approach. The data analysis in the main study benefitted through having analysed one interview initially.

Phase 1: Familiarising myself with the data

As part of becoming familiar with the data, I committed to a prolonged engagement with the data using a variety of different modes. Transcription was commenced for interviews between two days and four weeks after the interview. This was due to the current study being conducted whilst having other academic commitments of a doctorate and working full-time. However, the time-lapse allowed me to have some reflective space after the interviews with the participants. Prior to starting the first transcription, I noticed an element of procrastination in getting started. I felt like I needed to "get ready" and to be in the "zone" to ensure that I made the most of the transcribing process. I noticed my heart was racing and my feet were tingling – I felt both nervous and excited. Interestingly, before I started transcribing, I put the household laundry in the washing machine and then sat down to begin transcribing. I manually transcribed the first three interviews which took between five and six hours split between two to three sessions per interview. The audio was recorded using an application called 'Voice record pro' which allows you to slow down the replay making it easier to listen and type concurrently. Despite this slowing down, I needed to take frequent breaks, and often needed to rewind

the audio where I had missed what was said. In the breaks, I would stand up and stretch. On some occasions, I had to leave a question mark to denote where I could not decipher what was said with a plan to return to this. I noted down pauses, voice tone and any sounds of movement.

For the remaining five interviews, Voice record pro was also used to record the interviews. However, I used a transcribing software called Premiere Pro by Adobe. The audio file is uploaded to the software, and it outputs the interviews in a written form in two to three minutes. However, it was unable to differentiate between two voices and was unformatted blocks of text. Therefore, I went through each interview and formatted the interviews into my voice and the participants. There were also frequent errors in the transcription, so I corrected this and cross-checked against the recorded interviews. Using the transcription software, meant the transcribing took around three to three and half hours. The main benefit from manually transcribing was that I was able to engage with the data more easily as I did not need to concentrate as hard on typing the interviews up.

I created word a document using a table with space for the transcript, and a separate column for my initial thoughts, observations, potential codes, and themes, and one for initial reflections. These two columns provided a space to include my stream of consciousness as part of the data collection. I deliberately did not think too deeply about what was coming up for me, and this space allowed somewhere for me to jot down the plentiful thoughts that were swirling in my head. Once I had completed the transcripts, I returned to the data by watching the video whilst reading the transcript. This enabled me to add to the data any further observations of the participants body movements, gestures and expressions which may not have been captured during my in-action interview. I was able to decipher any unclear parts of the audio. This helped me add to both columns with more initial thoughts, themes, codes, and reflections. The final part of the transcribing process was to listen to the audio again, whilst reading the transcript allowing a further engagement with the data. Moving between the audio, video and back to the audio and my research diary

allowed a triangulation of the initial phase of analysis.

The prolonged engagement with the data was happening during the day and at night. I used my research diary to document any thoughts, emotions, and felt sense. I found the two methods of transcribing physically and emotionally tiring. Physically, this was during the actual transcribing, but the emotional consequence started afterwards at night-time. For a few nights after each interview, I was waking up after a few hours and then struggling to get back to sleep. My restlessness centred around reflecting on themes of paradoxes and tensions of being a working mother, and particularly when the schools were closed in lockdown. I started to notice existential themes during this process but could not quite grasp an overall sense of what they could bel. I felt like my initial engagement with the data was clouded in a fog which felt chaotic. I had a sense of moving in and out of clarity, being open and closed to the data and any themes emerging. There was this continual sense of movement of going back and forth throughout the study, going from structure of the four worlds and code book, and back to the data. This happened throughout the data analysis and during the write-up.

Once the transcripts had been completed, I shared copies with my second supervisor, Jo. This provided the chance to share my method and process of becoming familiar with the data, and to allow Jo to have input on my interview style and approach. After the first interview, Jo gave positive feedback in terms of my ability to stay with the participant's process. We reflected on the successful method and application of using a crib sheet to loosely adhere to the four worlds as a lens to capture data holistically. I shared with Jo that some of my interventions and questions in the interview were quite lengthy. Reflecting with Jo, I was able to see that this was a manifestation of my anxiety. It was like when I started my counselling training, where I tended to speak too much and step into the client's space. I remember feedback from a lecturer being that often I worked too hard and needed to do less. A learning from the initial interview, was that also in data collection I need to take a less active role, such as when making an intervention and to allow more

intersubjective space between the participant and myself. However, as a contrast to this, Jo reflected that interview style was without an agenda, and I allowed the participant to share her story in her own way and pace. This meant that the interview was consistent with my epistemological and ontological position of openness. I started to make sense of the overall theme of paradoxes in the data. Discussing the theme with Jo, made it clearer that existential themes of conflict and paradox were starting to be found in the data. Having the opportunity to discuss in detail both my experience of the initial interview, my reflections afterwards and having feedback on the transcripts was invaluable in then progressing to the next seven interviews.

As part of a research auditing and to ensure confidentiality, I created a folder on my personal laptop using Apple's iCloud facility which is password protected with two-step authentication. In the folder, I stored the audio and video files, transcripts, reflective notes using anonymised file names, my research diary where I have written my reflexive notes. The crib sheets from each interview are hard copies and stored in a locked filing cabinet within my locked and alarmed clinic room. Likewise, I have kept notes on all supervision meetings since July 2021 which included notes beforehand of things I wanted discuss, and helpful and insightful comments or actions following the meeting.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

I developed a way of generating initial codes after the first interview which I discussed with my supervisor after the first interview. The method was used to code all interviews, Firstly, I returned to the typed-up transcript with the aim of generating initial codes. Next, I reviewed my initial notes and observations trying to make sense of them as possible codes whilst also going back to the data, to see if I had missed anything and added further thoughts onto the transcript. Then, I went back through the transcript and started to highlight in yellow quotes which seemed most salient to their lived experience. At this point, I could sense some clarity in viewing the data. The act of moving from the whole transcript to more specific segments was comforting and reassuring that I could make sense of the data and offer a meaningful

analysis. I created a new table, with separate columns for raw data (so the quotations); initial thoughts; whether the data was semantic (what was the surface level of the data) or latent (how the Working mother made sense of it) or both; initial codes; and themes but still maintaining a stream of consciousness.

With each interview, I gave myself a few days to process the initial code generation and then returned to them. Taking this approach allowed for additional clarity in analysing the data. Consistent with an iterative approach, I returned to the raw data to see if any further quotations could be included or combined to generate themes. This created 55 separate segments of data to review, rather than over 30 pages of transcribed data per interview. I began to organise and structure the data further, by highlighting salient words in purple that could be used as a code and in the themes, started to note which lifeworld they could relate to, so personal, physical, social or spiritual or whether they were a theme across more than one lifeworld. I returned back and forth from the data, adding thoughts and notes to the possible codes and themes in the table. It was this iterative process that meant the codes and themes were able to emerge. By repeating this approach, I was able to bring 240 pages of transcribed interviews down to 30 pages of data to be analysed.

Throughout this phase, I used my laptop to track my iterations. I considered printing out my tables of data, but I find organising information on a computer more structured. Using a digital media is a better way contain my own inner and outer chaos when trying to manage and assimilate a large quantity of data. I felt that paper copies would feel unwieldly, disorganised and I would struggle to keep track of my process. I suspect this is because of years of being a project manager for digital creative projects and used to creating files, folders and tracking workflows.

Throughout the coding phase, I shared my thoughts on codes and themes with my supervisor. At times, they felt quite rough and unformed, but these supervision meetings helped to begin creating a structure in the data analysis but there needed to be further work on what the codes and themes meant, and to create some consistency and transparency. At this stage, I began to engage more explicitly

for what themes which were emerging from the codes, and to consider a codebook.

Phase 3 and 4: Searching for themes and Reviewing themes

Writing a draft codebook was the catalyst that brought the themes to light. I created a table that had columns for code, a description of the code, noted whether it was inductive (from the data), deductive (pre-conceived), semantic (surface) and/or latent (making sense), a column for the four lifeworlds as a deductive theme, and a column noting specific existential themes, such as conflict, tension, survival, anxiety, freedom and so on. I shared the codebook with my supervisor, who urged me to go back to the research question to triangulate the codes, themes and data. Going back to the research question, illuminated that the data was consistently indicating a paradox in the lived experience of the participant during the school closures. From here, I was able to translate down the codes into a hierarchy of meaningful themes and subthemes of their lived experience.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

I then created a table which served as a codebook with codes and descriptions but also denotes overarching themes, subthemes, and whether they are latent, semantic, deductive, or inductive (see appendix 8). It became clear in this phase, that using the four lifeworlds as an initial way to structure the themes offered a way to organise the data. By using them as a lens, it was helping me make sense during the data analysis phase. The different iterations of the tables, moving from initial notes to the table in appendix 8 were all saved and stored securely as outlined above.

Phase 6: Writing up the study

The final phase of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) six-phase approach is the writing up. Consistent with TA, the writing up has formed part of the data analysis (Braun & Clarke (2013). The write-up was done using an iterative process so moving between data analysis and discussion and keeping them both separate whilst ensuring they were connected. I would argue this process is similar to the experience of being a working mother. Being a 'worker' and 'mother' are separate roles that are interconnected at all times but can sometimes be hard to navigate the 'sway' between

them both. During the write-up, as I started writing up the analysis section. I had to continually return to my codebook and themes, and to the raw data to spend more time considering my findings and how to analyse them. I expanded my table on numerous times to ensure I was capturing the working mother's experiences in my analysis and was consistent with my research question, epistemological and ontological positions. There was an ongoing iterative process as during the write-up, I also went back to the transcript and then back to the data analysis and themes. I found that returning to the data was essential whenever I experienced a sense of confusion or lack of clarity. This happened frequently throughout the write-up and helped me navigate these moments of which often felt overwhelming.

Braun and Clarke (2023) advocate that there is no standard way and no rigid or fixed way to 'do' reflexive thematic analysis. I would argue this extends to how the write up is structured, as long as one remains what they call a "knowing researcher" (p.1). Therefore, all choices and decisions in methodological procedures need to be justified by the researcher. I chose to use different headings in the Findings and the Discussion sections. My choice illustrates how the four lifeworlds were used to collect and analyse the data and therefore, used as headings in the Findings section. However, to meet the aim of exploring holistic experience, the Discussion used different headings. These headings are related to their holistic experiences and discusses the interconnected and interwoven experiences of the participants.

As mentioned, I used the four existential life worlds as a loose frame to structure the interview, capture data and for data analysis. The aim was to ensure the research met the aim of exploring holistically the working mother's experience. However, separating the themes could suggest that experience is not holistic but separate. Therefore, in terms of discussing the findings, I have moved away from using the four existential worlds as headings to return to exploring the participants experience as holistic. Therefore, their experience both within and across the four worlds is interwoven and interconnected. The discussion is a key way to meet the aim of a holistic exploration of the working mothers experience.

Findings

Participants

All participants met the inclusion criteria. The participants were aged between 25-55 years old, had two or more primary school aged children at home when the schools were closed, worked in paid employment for four or more days a week from home and had a live-in partner. All participants described living with male partners who they referred to as husband. They had no live-in help, lived in the UK and English was their first language. When recruiting participants, all self-selected. The homogeneity in the participants was related to their role of being a working mother and having primary school aged children when the schools were closed. Homogeneity was further enhanced as the participants described holding senior roles in their jobs although salary or status was not an explicit part of the recruitment strategy. All participants described themselves as being in long-term relationships.

The rationale for this was because the gap in the research illustrated was around the holistic, lived experience of working mothers. The homogeneity of the recruited participants having senior roles and associated salary was coincidental although most likely influenced by using LinkedIn as part of the recruitment strategy. As working mother myself, I worked in a senior role in the corporate world. This may have further influenced the participants being higher earning and in senior roles of the participants due to my professional network on LinkedIn. As the participants were self-selecting, there was no attempt to screen out or focus on any further diversity of the sample other than specified in the recruitment strategy. Participants were from a diverse national and ethnic background although no specific ethnic or nationality data was captured. As a learning, it would have been prudent to collect data relating to ethnicity and nationality at the time of interview. Future research could focus on a sample which included working mothers from other socioeconomic, ethnic backgrounds or experience disability. Such studies may yield differing findings to the current study. Research has found that there was a higher level of inequality for working mothers during the school closures, who experience disability, lower-incomes or from an ethnic minority (UNFPA, 2020).

Method

Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that the results and discussion section can be combined. In the current study, the write up of the results section used the four existential worlds as a loose framework to structure the main themes to collect the data, structure the data analysis and findings. However, the discussion has been written and structured to be consistent with the aim of the study to offer insights into the holistic lived experience of the participants. Therefore, the four lifeworld's are not used in the discussion as this could suggest how experience is fragmented into four aspects and therefore invoking a separateness. Taking this approach in the write-up, highlights that the four life worlds are interconnected and interwoven and therefore, not separate. Therefore, not adhering to them to structure the write-up of the discussion demonstrates and commits to the aim of exploring the holistic lived experience of the working mothers, rather than only through four separate lifeworlds.

Summary of participants

Pseudonym	Age (at interview)	Age of children (March 2020).	Employment (March 2020)	Location
Ellie	46	Two boys aged 5 and 7.	Finance, Online education provider	London
Zara	46	Two daughters aged 7 and 10; Son aged 5.	Retail, Product design and strategy	London
Daisy	46	Two sons aged 5 and 9; Daughter aged 12.	Engineer, FMCG Product design and strategy	Outside London
Kate	46	Twin girls aged 8.	Community psychiatric nurse, NHS	Outside London
Jenny	50	Twin boy and girl aged 7.	Senior Marketeer, research	Outside London
Selene	55	Two sons aged 9 and 11.	Pharmacist, NHS	Outside London
Helen	44	Two boys aged 5 and 7.	Senior marketeer, FMCG	London

Sasha	49	Three boys aged 8, 10 and 11.	Social media strategist, self-employed	Outside London

Summary of themes

Overarching theme: Paradoxes	
Main themes	**Subthemes**
The physical world: Locked down and opened up	**The home:** **Creating a space for work and school** An unsafe, safe place **Luxury and loss of space**
	Outside home: **The Supermarket: A public-private space** **Restricted freedom: The daily walk** **The natural world but an unnatural experience** **The natural world: Spring/Summer versus Winter Weather**
The physical world: The body	**Loss of energy, yet always on** **Wellbeing: Losing and gaining**

The social world: Connected and disconnected relationships	**Battles and treaties:** Partner and children That Friday feeling **Family: Children** Challenging and cherishing **Family: Concern for their wellbeing** **Children:** Psychological wellbeing; Academic; Additional needs; Lack of social contact **Partner:** Negative impacts on their mental wellbeing **Family: Extended family** Grandparents: Separated but supported Extended family: Distant yet closer **Friends: Family friends** Being entertainingly creative Making comparisons **Friends: Non-working mothers and working mothers** Friend or foe **Work: Colleagues and management** Support yet not supported

The personal world: Distressed and delighted	Guilt: Available yet unavailable Furlough and freedom envy Being upset and joyful Death anxiety: A real threat Authority: Lacking governance
The spiritual world: Blending and compartmentalising the self	**Mother, teacher and worker roles** Making the invisible visible Being a juggler: Juggling and struggling Rose-tinted spectacles

The four existential lifeworlds

Consistent with the aims of the study, the four existential lifeworlds (physical, social, personal, and spiritual) offered a deductive and existential lens to explore the lived experience of the working mother's and have been used to provide a holistic frame. However, I did not share this deductive lens explicitly with the participants. The rationale is that the four lifeworlds were used to collect the data in the interview to ensure a holistic lens. For the data analysis and findings, the four lifeworlds were kept separate. The rationale for keeping them separate is because they were a tool to aid organisation of the data analysis and findings write-up. In the discussion, the four lifeworlds are viewed as interconnected and a holistic way to explore the working mother's lived experience.

The physical world: Locked down and opened up

Deurzen-Smith (1984) defines the physical world as how we relate to our environment and the natural world around us. This lifeworld can include our relationship and attitude towards our body, bodily needs and those of other people, health, illness and mortality. It also includes the physical surroundings of where we live (both in the home and outside space, such as the garden) and meteorological experiences such as the weather.

Physical space: Being at home

Creating a space for work and school

Out of the eight participants, only two were key workers who were allowed to work outside of home during the school closures. Both were participants employed by the NHS. Selene was a pharmacist who was required to go to their place of work to prepare the vaccinations. Kate was a community psychiatric nurse who visited patients in their homes. However, both key workers chose to keep their children at home rather than send them to school. Therefore, all participants spent time working at home and home-schooling during school closures. Most participants had experienced some working from home before COVID-19 (such as one day a week), none had worked at home full-time. Therefore, all had to set up a more permanent workspace during the school closures. The workspaces included separate office spaces and "blended" and separate work-home-schooling spaces in the living room, home office or kitchen. Several of them shifted their workspaces in the second school closure.

Ellie spoke about living in a small house and having to divide their workspace into two spaces for her and her husband. There was a separate office with a door, where she and her husband would "take turns for slots" and the kitchen. She found that she spent more time in the kitchen and that it was she whom the children most often would interrupt (even when she was in meetings). Another participant, who described being in a small house, set up a workspace in her bedroom. In the first school closure, she worked with her laptop on her bed. In the second school closure, she set up a desk in her bedroom:

> "all I can remember is the second time, feeling like this is just going to kill me, you know, I put a lot of energy in to the first one, and the second was like, oh my god, give me strength, I think that's where I learnt to clear a space, put a table in my bedroom." (Zara)

Daisy initially set up in an upstairs bedroom in the first school closure due to struggling to concentrate when working near her children who were homeschooling downstairs. However, she moved downstairs to the living room in the second school closure due to

becoming more involved in their home-schooling, but the children were still in separate room:

> " I am not the sort of person who would be able to concentrate on my work if I had my child or children sitting next to me at the same table or even in the same room, frankly. So I count myself very lucky about that. So that was the set-up for the first lockdown. …..[in the second school closure] I moved downstairs into, you know, where I'm sitting now actually is in our corner of our living room. And why did I move downstairs during the second lockdown? I can't recall the reason, because the boys were still in the two other rooms downstairs where they were perhaps I just got more accustomed to working from home. I'll maybe I'll go put on my headphones, which really allows me to kind of shut off the peripheral noise, you know, going on in the other rooms of the house." (Daisy)

Kate decided initially that she would base herself downstairs to be near her children whilst her husband was upstairs. Jenny described having no choice but to work at the kitchen table because her husband's job requires four computer screens, which meant he needed the home office. She also recognised her tendency towards adaptability and flexibility in making her workspace work. All participants described how the demands from schools increased in the second school closure, and their children required more input with schooling. This meant any children in the first school closure who had separate study spaces (such as their bedrooms) and were moved to working at the kitchen table alongside the participant's or sharing their home office. These shared work-school spaces were described as "work bled into home life".

Luxury and loss of space

Speaking about being at home, there was a theme of paradox in terms of being grateful for having a home and garden which allowed them space; yet, they also spoke about having a loss of space for themselves. When talking about their experience of being at home, the participants described having a garden as

a “luxury”, being “fortunate”, and “lucky” to have space for themselves and their children to have their bedrooms; Ellie described having a separate office as a “treasured” space. All participants described enjoying having a garden, and how important the weather had between March and July 2020. Ellie described their experience of the garden in the first school closure, as being sunny, it allowed for more activities for the children to have in their outdoor space. On one occasion, her children created an outdoor restaurant for her and her husband. She remembered going into the garden at the end of her workday and having a ‘sundowner’ alcoholic drink, sitting in the setting sun, which was “glorious”. Going into the garden at the end of the day led to her and her husband drinking alcohol as it was part of their “relaxation” routine. Having longer days and the warmth of the sun was significant to her. She remembered a significant contrast to the second school closure, which was in the Winter (January – March 2021), when it was cold and dark, and there were shorter days, which limited her chance to go outside. The importance of weather and the differences between the two school closures will be explored in more detail in a separate section due to the significant role it played in the participants lived experiences. Kate described the garden and undertaking projects with her children, such as building a pond. Sasha set up an outdoor cinema screen with her family. When outside socialising was permitted, for all participants, the garden became an outdoor social space to meet up with friends and family.

However, as a paradox to having the luxury of space, the participants described a loss of physical and metaphorical space for themselves. The loss led to them feeling trapped and not having enough time for themselves. They spoke about needing “space” and more “free time”. Jenny spoke about how being at home full-time with the children conflicted with her sense of self:

> “So I’m here with the kids. I have the kids 24/7, seven days a week and yeah there’s no gap……And it’s not just who I am..And I’m not talking about the secret chocolate bar in the fridge. I’m talking about having something that’s

> just. Just mine. So they had to just they had to just give me the space. So, you know, sometimes, you know, sometimes I let the kids stay up late because I didn't have the energy to by the end of the day, the working day, and sorting everything, I didn't have the energy to put them to bed at 7:00 at night and sit there and wait for them to fall asleep." (Jenny)

Ellie echoed the idea and how she stayed up later because after the children had gone to bed, she "just wanted a few more hours to myself in the evenings". She tried to do small things to prioritise her self-care, such as having an evening bath. The consequence of staying up later will be explored further when considering the concept of their lived experience of the body and their experience of fatigue.

Daisy spoke about the benefits of the school closures and being forced to work from home, which enabled her to gain time. Her role involves long hours. Pre-COVID, she was expected to be in the office five days a week with her workplace having a "more traditional" attitude which expected people to be in the office. However, removing the commute gained her time in her day, which she re-prioritised for herself in terms of exercising daily, such as going for a run. She experienced the extra time as a significant benefit for herself of lockdown.

> "So gaining 2 hours of my day to see more of my family, spend more time with my children, actually benefit from the extra time in terms of getting up early and instead of driving for an hour, going out for a run my mornings…. exercise was something that had fallen by the wayside for me because that was the first thing to be sacrificed when you're trying to fit in full time working, commuting and the family prior to that. So getting back into a regular exercise routine, which lockdown afforded me to do, was fantastic." (Daisy)

Paradoxically, she recognised the increased "tension" she felt in terms of being at home and having to prioritise home-schooling. Overall, she felt the additional time at home gained was an "overarching positive" because she could spend more time with her children. Pre-COVID, she said, "I never felt like I had enough time with any of them." However, other participants spoke of how the school closures and being at

home was detrimental due to their loss of privacy and for the community psychiatric nurse, visiting the patient's home meant her home did not feel safe.

An unsafe, safe place

Being at home with their partner and family also led to a loss of privacy for the participants. The loss included being unable to speak openly to friends and children hearing arguments between them and their husbands. Kate, the community psychiatric nurse, described in detail the consequence of a lack of privacy at home due to the nature of their work and a sense of not feeling safe at home. Part of her role in the community mental health team is to provide a Duty service, which provides a support phone line from 9 am – 5 pm Monday to Friday. This offers a place for people with serious and enduring mental health issues who are under the care of the team to call for support. They are often presenting with significant distress. Kate described how they could be suicidal or actively harming themselves.

> "So again, there was this there wasn't this privacy in some way for me in my job, which was really hard because in our line of work, obviously we're dealing with people that are very distressed on the phone or suicidal or, you know, having thoughts of harming themselves or are actively self-harming and having those discussions. " (Kate)

Kate described a sense of conflict in wanting to do her job and support the distressed patients while also protecting her children.

> "I remember there were times I would have to sort of go either sit on the stairs or go and sit in another room while being available to them. But listening to someone and have to really be mindful about how I ask somebody what their intentions are….. And I don't want them [her children] hearing about suicide and self-harm and things like that. So that was a challenge for me as well, sort of ensuring I was doing my job and what I should be doing and asking all the right questions in a way that wasn't going to then trigger a reaction in my children. It was horrible actually. And I that was one of the biggest I would say one of the things that stuck with me so much about the whole situation

> was that my home had now become, you know, what I would regarded or regarded as my safe space was no longer really….my sort of ability to be my safe space because I was now having to bring other people's distress into my home." (Kate)

In addition to bringing "people's distress" psychologically into her home, Kate was also fearful of bringing COVID-19 into her home after her home visits to patients. She described being dressed in full personal protective equipment but still feeling unsafe as she did not know what the patient's personal hygiene was, and earlier on in the pandemic, there was an increased sense of uncertainty about how it transmitted and how to mitigate the dangers. She described a fear of returning the coronavirus to her home and putting her children at risk.

> "And again, that was it for me that was something that felt really dangerous as well, because it was like, is this stuff [coronavirus] going to be coming into the car? We didn't know enough about it to be. It was kind of like we just knew it was airborne and so, yeah, I guess that was that's, that's the kind of initial thing. It was just so strange." (Kate)

When not working, like the other participants, she described being outside the home as an opportunity to experience freedom and a way to escape.

Being outside home: Freedom and restriction

The Supermarket: A public-private space

The supermarket became a public space that offered some time for the participants. Making a trip to the supermarket became a strategy to create more space for themselves. Therefore, apart from being a place to buy food, going to the supermarket offered the dual role as a public space where they had privacy and time for themselves. However, it was recognised that this was not quality time, and most participants spoke about their concerns about the lack of food on the shelves. Sasha described seeing the depleted shelves as "post-apocalyptic".

> "I don't think I had any time for me. I think the only time for me I had was when I went to the supermarket. And that wasn't really quality me time." (Selene)

For Ellie, she integrated a daily early morning walk to the supermarket and talking to a friend. For Selene and Jenny, it meant a chance to call their friends and not be overheard at home. The privacy allowed them to speak more openly about the challenges of being at home 24/7, whether about issues with their partner or their personal challenges of the school closures. All participants spoke about the importance of having space outside the family home with regard to daily walks. However, the daily walk was about having social time without the family and escaping from the home.

Restricted freedom: The daily walk

During the school closures, the government guidelines permitted a daily walk of around an hour. All participants spoke about how the daily walk was an important part of having freedom from their home. However, they recognised that it was a restricted freedom due to the government guidelines and the demands of their work requirements. The daily walk was therefore paradoxical in terms of being experienced as freedom yet restricted.

All participants described the daily walk as a positive part of their experience during school closures. The walks could be at the start of the day, before the 'school day', at lunchtime or during the first school closure in the early evening. As Daisy described, the walks were so vital that they were "religiously" adhered to. The walks provided an opportunity for exercise, family time, exploring the local area, and, for Jenny, a way to combine all of these simultaneously and continue working. The social aspects and multi-faced functions will be explored in the Social and Spiritual worlds chapters. All spoke about this time being restricted either because of the COVID guidelines or because they needed to return to work. This led to emotional experiences of guilt and jealousy explored in the Personal world chapter. Going for walk signalled a chance for them to take a break from their working day or the end of their working day. The daily walk was described as a pleasurable experience and a chance to be in the natural world.

The natural world but an unnatural experience

When describing their daily walk, the experience by all participants of being in a rural or countryside green space or their own gardens was described as beneficial. All participants used rich descriptions to describe the scenery of the natural world whilst being in the green spaces. The natural world presented an important escape for Jenny, and she described a visceral experience of being in the elements. She explains how the sensory experiences helped offer her an escape from being locked down.

> "the times when I went for a walk, and I was able to stand at the top of the windy hill, and it was raining or windy, and you felt it on your face, it felt refreshing because you in that moment and that one moment of time, I felt a different sensation that had been that you didn't have during lockdown because it was wiped away from us all." (Jenny)

Others spoke about the joy and gratefulness of being outside in the natural world and a chance to explore their local area as "it was all around nature for us with the girls" (Kate) or "walking in farmer's fields" (Sasha). For Ellie, Zara, Selene and Helen, who lived in London, they spoke of the importance of being outside and having a local park or square nearby. Ellie described, discovering space outside on her doorstep that she had not realised existed pre-lockdown. She described how exploring the local outdoor spaces, such as playgrounds and woodlands, with her children made her feel like "we were a million miles away". Escaping from the house and work gave her a chance "to breathe out" and experience her local area, "you just saw beauty in a different way," such as the grass blowing in the wind, meadows and her children going on swings. The weather in SC1 was described by Daisy as being a significant benefit:

> "You know, I would close my laptop at 4:30, 5:00, and we'd go as a family out for a walk every day in the woods. And I mean, we're very fortunate where we live. We live right on the doorstep of some beautiful woodland. So you didn't necessarily need to come into contact with anyone at all, but you could really

> go for beautiful walks for an hour as a family in the lovely springtime. It was a lovely period of weather." (Daisy)

The natural world: Spring/Summer versus Winter weather

The natural world also extends to the experience of the weather. The weather was distinctly different during the two school closures. In the first school closure, it was Spring and Summer and in the second, it was in Winter. Therefore, in the first school closures, the weather was warmer, and the days were longer than in second. The difference in the weather between the two school closures was mentioned by all participants. All participants mentioned the "glorious" weather between March and July 2020. The weather positively impacted daily walking, social time, and well-being. Conversely, the colder, darker, and shorter days between January – March 2021 had a negative impact, as mentioned by all participants. It was described as "harder" and "more stressful":

> "The second lockdown was much more stressful. Moreover, it was a much more difficult time of year being the depths of winter. And I do think that played an enormous part on it in it, you know, in terms of how we felt about the situation. And it was very challenging. The second longer period of lockdown and home-schooling because there was shorter daylight hours" (Zara)

They described how the shorter, darker days meant the children were less likely to play outside in the garden and that with poor weather, they did not have their daily walk. Selene expressed concerned about the increased screentime:

> "I found it really difficult after the second, after the second, because the second lockdown was hard because it was winter and it was dark and the kids would finish at five and there was nothing else to do but screens because it was pouring with rain and it was dark and it was cold. It wasn't like the summer where you could go out and do stuff, and it was really, really difficult because I really struggle watching my children spend time on screens 24/7 because I'm aware that it's to the detriment of society that all this stuff is going on." (Selene)

However, despite the impact of the Winter weather, there was still an overarching theme of the positives of having more family time. Nearly all participants mentioned that when remembering back, there was a sense of “rose-tinted spectacles”. The concept of rose-tinted spectacles will be returned to later and was present in all four existential lifeworlds.

Physical world: The body

Deurzen (2010) describes how the body is our “main point of contact” (p.139) with the world. Therefore, understanding how the participants experienced their body during the school closures is part of the aim of the current study.

Loss of energy, yet always on

A paradoxical theme of the participants experience of their body was a never-ending sense of having to keep going, even when they were feeling exhausted. Jenny described a sense of being on a “racetrack” that never stopped, another talked about being “always on”. Several vividly described how their body felt and described a heightened threat and stress response:

> “when I think back about the day to day of working, home schooling just constantly, your adrenaline, your heart, constantly felt like on the floor so maybe the times when we did get away to the woods it’s like this idyllic time but it wasn’t”. (Ellie)
>
> “I might have come out of a very stressful morning of meetings, and my, you know, cortisol levels might still be very high. And then I have to go into the kitchen and make the kids lunch. And, you know, it’s a completely different mindset and set of skills, and it’s difficult to shift from one to the other. You know, literally in a matter of 5 seconds that it takes me to walk from one room to another.” (Zara)
>
> “I never really slept that well because of the anxiety around it. It definitely felt so physically sick at times because you’re kind of also not knowing what you’re going into when you see a patient because you can’t you then again, you’re sort of dependent on them being careful. So I don’t know what their

> hygiene has been like or anything like that. There's all that kind of the sort of physical side of the anxiety, you know, in your tummy. " (Kate)

Daisy and Jenny both described how it was impossible to "switch off". Daisy said "I am not a light switch, you know, it's not like a switch that you can literally turn off as you exit the room where you're working and going into the room where the kids are.". The inability to switch off was linked with feelings of exhaustion and not being able to sleep well. Likewise, the participants described how their physical and mental well-being was both negatively and positively impacted. There was a theme of looking back with rose-tinted spectacle and questioning their memories of being an "idyllic" time.

Wellbeing: Losing and gaining

In terms of the wellbeing in their mind and bodies, for all participants there was a distinct difference between the two school closures. The theme was around either losing or gaining benefits in their wellbeing whether this was described in a physical sense such as losing or gaining weight or fitness; prioritising their wellbeing by healthy eating and drinking or their self-care or finding more time to exercise and improve their psychological and physical wellbeing. The theme was characterised by a paradox of either losing or gaining.

In the first school closure, Ellie recognised her well-being (both physical and psychological) was not prioritised as " I did not look after me as much as I would normally do". Not going into the office meant she stopped taking the time for "getting ready". She feels this had a negative effect on how she felt about herself and how she looked. For others, as mentioned previously, there was a benefit of not going into the office as it meant she could prioritise exercise, which was a "gift". Selene commented that in the second school closure, going to the park to play football or for a walk with her children meant she was the "fittest" she had ever been. For Selene, Jenny, Ellie and Zara, being at home meant prioritising healthy eating for the family. However, for the

majority, there was a significant difference between the two school closures in prioritising their physical well-being. Apart from Daisy and Helen, participants recognised that in the first school closure, they ate and drank too much alcohol but then made a conscious shift to change this in the second one..

> “God, we drank so much in that first lockdown, and then stopped drinking altogether because I had put on like a stone in” (Zara)
>
> “I remember drinking a lot of gin in the summery one. I didn’t even like gin before going into lockdown. Yeah, I do remember liking gin in the first lockdown and there being lots of kind of sitting in the conservatory on Zoom, drinking gin in the evenings and weekends and putting a lot of weight on…… [in SC2] I got did a couple of subscriptions, so less meals and body, beach body or something. I just remember doing less meals, a lot of less meals, exercises, but I obviously didn’t counteract the amount of gin I was drinking” (Sasha)

The vaccination roll-out in SC2 were referenced by Ellie, Kate, Selene and Helen as benefiting their psychological and physical wellbeing. The vaccination was described as making them feel safer when going outside the home, and also their concerns about their parents contracting the virus was decreased. Helen described the vaccination roll-out as offering and being “a bit of light at the end of the tunnel”.

In their physical world, the main theme was of paradoxical experiences of being in their environments (both home and outside the home) and their physical selves.

The social world: Connected and disconnected relationships

The social world is characterised by relationships, which can be either transient or permanent, intimate or distant. However, it is where an individual or group are connected in some way through their thoughts, feelings and actions (APA, 2023). In this study, relationships described as part of their lived experience included the immediate family (partner and children), extended family (grandparents,

cousins, uncles), work colleagues, friends (working mothers and mothers not in paid employment, and family friends. Each of these relationships formed individual themes and subthemes in the data analysis of their lived experience of the social dimension. Another part of their social world was institutions of authority, such as the government and schools. However, these lived experiences ignited emotional responses and so these will be explored in the Personal world chapter. All participants were married to their partner and referred to them as 'husband'. The central theme seemed to be around paradoxes with both battles and treaties. The participants described how they worked together as a team, having enjoyable experiences (as a family, but also a sense of togetherness). However, they also spoke of experiences of conflict (around inequality and frustration).

Battles and treaties: Family and Partner

The participants spoke of experiencing both conflict and collaboration with their partner and their children. Battles and collaboration with the partner were over the same themes. For example, over who used which workspace, who liaised with the teachers and who was supporting the children with the schoolwork. Battles with the children were over the participants supporting them to do their schoolwork, whilst juggling their own work demands.

All participants described how they had to jointly navigate the challenges of work from home whilst the children did their schooling at home. When describing the battles and treaties over homeschooling, six of the participants reported earning similar or higher salaries and having the same or higher level of seniority as their husbands. Therefore, there was a theme of having a shared right to prioritising their work role and looking after the children. Ellie described how this could be challenging to negotiate and could lead to battles:

> "there'd be a battle sometimes if I had meetings and my husband had meetings. And we just had this, I've got to do this, you've got to do that and we had to come up with some agreement about whose role was more important at that point." (Zara)

Half the participants described having their husband around as a benefit of lockdown because it meant increased family time. Pre-pandemic, Kate's husband travelled for work. Helen and her and husband both travelled for work. Daisy had a long commute to work. The decrease in travelling during the school closures brought them closer as a couple and as a family.

> "I think it put us closer together, to be honest, because in many ways, like we were living quite independent lives like ships in the night……on the on the positive side, like as a family, we got closer..... it was the first time we were able to have dinner with the kids every day and, you know, have a bit more family structure because we were home. So, you know, there was there was silver linings to aspects of it." (Helen)

Even those who described the challenges of all being at home together and trying to manage working and home-schooling made positive comments about the time as a family and with their partner. Descriptions included the time as "really nice" as "one of the positives" and the "highs" of their experience, "precious", "amazing", "brilliant", and a "great gift". All participants reported having lovely memories of the increased family-time. However, nearly all the participants again recognised the role of rose-tinted spectacles in remembering their experiences, and they have "blocked out" some of the difficult experiences. None of the participants expressed a desire to go back into lockdown and the schools being closed.

> "So but at the same time it was really nice family time. But no so much like I want to be back. I really don't. I don't want to be back in lockdown, I can't. I think it's rose-tinted glasses." (Sasha)

Two participants described their husbands as taking on more of the domestic load of the home, including cooking, ironing, and home-schooling. Even those who shared a more equal domestic load described feeling "really lucky that my husband was really supportive and present." Conversely, other participants felt like there was an inequality in how they managed the home-schooling and working, and this led to conflict.

> "I remember and then there were the odd moments when me and my husband were not on the same page, aligned, and he would go I'm going into work and I would say but I've got a call, who is going to be with the kids? Because the kids are too young to just get on with it themselves" (Zara)
>
> "I think it was just that's the only time I can think of where I got cross which was when I was on a call and he said I'm off, I've got to go to work. And I was like how is this going to work, can you not just wait until I've finished this and then I can. But you know what that was just, who else am I going to get cross at" (Selene)

Jenny described how her husband was unable to multitask, which meant the home-schooling and parenting tasks fell mainly to her. She found this frustrating and described how it highlighted that despite her success in her career, there was still an inequality for working mothers, as illustrated in the existing inequality in her relationship. Her experience also illuminated the juggling role that the participants were undertaking, and it is expanded further when looking at the spiritual lifeworld.

> "I think it he he's always been it's like information will come from school and so I've seen I'm not read it. What does it say? And I start saying 'well I'm not telling you, you can bloody read it yourself.' [he said] 'Yeah, but you've read it, you've obviously read it darling, why don't you just do it'. And I said 'no it's not fair, I have to read it and then I have to sit and spend an hour explaining it to you. That's an hour, I could be doing something else. So no, I don't have time'…….And he was really struggling with that, that I'm finding time to do this. I mean, I'm finding I was sitting on the toilet, for God's sake, reading emails or reading the updates, just so you know, cleaning my teeth, reading that. So I wasn't, there wasn't a single moment of time that wasn't utilized so everything didn't come crumbling down. I don't think I feared everything crumbling down. I needed to keep everything spinning. So when so the arguments

> really increased because I didn't have time to sit down with him to go through everything that I may have had time to do previously……And it's like, I don't want to do that. Well, somebody has to do all that, you know, and it's, it's kind of the equality, you know, isn't there…..And I think that really has impacted certainly impacted me and highlighted during that whole COVID thing just how bloody awful it is." (Jenny)

Her experience was echoed by Selene who had been involved in a day of work meetings whilst her husband was responsible for homeschooling. However, she found at the end of the day that he had not been monitoring or responding to the plethora of emails that had come from school regarding the tasks for the day and whether the children had completed them.

> "my work went ballistic, as I explained to you, because my client group are like considered the pits of the pits in comparison to social standing. But then, at the same time, it all went crazy……. …. So I was working six days a week writing, guidance, writing this…. and I kind of left N to deal with it. And then I'd come back and everything was set up through my personal email for school. So one day I had 56 messages from his teachers saying, 'This work has been done, this work needs to be done'. And I was just like, hold on a minute, I can't deal with this, N. And he was like, well, it's not a big deal. And I'm like, well, you're not getting 50 messages that he hasn't done his work. What are you doing with these posts? You know, help me here. And it was on, and then I know you're doing the best you're doing, you know, kind of. But I was getting the brunt of it because it was these messages that kept on pinging" (Selene)

In terms of home schooling, Sasha described a collaborative approach with her husband and being like a "tag-team" as "we kind of dipped in and out" of who would sit with the children. The tag-team could involve agreeing on time blocking and splitting their workday between work and homeschooling,

dividing the subjects depending on their academic ability, or requesting or visibly needing some time away from the homeschooling or parenting role.

> “Half of it was just having conversations with them to try and keep them so, you know, not killing each other. But yeah, the kind of the routine we got into, my husband and I was we, you know, we split them up, and each of us had one of them and they had to sit and do some kind of activity while we worked, you know, next to us.” (Helen)

Despite the conflicts, all the marriages survived the school closures. As Selene remarked, “Everything became a battle. I mean, we survived, though”. Getting to Friday and having the weekend for family time with no home-schooling was an important milestone.

That Friday feeling

All participants mentioned remembering positive memories of family time, including the relief of getting to Fridays and the weekends being important times for organising fun social experiences for their children and spending time as a family. Getting to Friday and the weekend was described with a sense of relief and celebration:

> “Particularly on a Friday afternoon we’d bunk off [smiles] for the afternoon and we took the boys. We’d take a can and maybe a drink to these fields, we’d walk, and I remember one time getting fish and chips, it was like ahh yeah, this is it, we’ve done it this, you celebrate, we’ve done it, we’ve survived and its Friday” (Ellie)

Friday signified family time and the end of the working and school week, which meant a chance to stop and have a meal together and watch a movie. For Jenny, this became sacred family time as it was a chance to reconnect in a familiar way from before COVID.

> “We would make a meal together, which invariably was always homemade pizza, make popcorn, and then we sit and watch a movie. And that was like a big rule, which none of us could break. And it’s like, whatever we doing, we

> had to stop and we had to do that. You know, we had to have that time of eating something together and watching a movie, and it might have only lasted 2 hours, but it was that two hour moment where we all just snuggled up on the sofa, and we're just like that old family again pre-COVID." (Jenny)

The weekend also offered participants the chance to be more creative in helping their children have social time. Sasha described organising "virtual sleepovers" where their children and friends would agree to watch the same movie (with a timed start) on their iPads or laptops in their own houses.

> "We're watching The Avengers so that all have, like, in their own houses, they'd have The Avengers on the telly that have their iPad with Zoom in front of them, and then they all press play on the telly at the same time so that they were all watching Avengers together and they'd all be like with their duvets and with their snacks and chatting away on Zoom and then watching a film together at the same time." (Sasha)

Selene spoke about organising virtual birthday celebrations over the weekend for their children. These included treasure hunts, escape rooms, and online games. The virtual treasure hunt involved other mothers, as the participants had worked together to hide the same or similar items around the house so they could also use the same clues and have a shared experience.

Family: Children

Challenging and cherishing

All participants spoke of both time spent with their children as cherished, such as when doing activities or going for a walk but paradoxically, challenging when supporting them with home-schooling. All the participants described the positive experience of the daily walk with their children in their local area. However, as described in the Physical world section, there was an awareness that the walks during the working week were also curtailed due to their work schedule or the COVID-19 guidelines. This led to feelings of guilt, which is explored in the Personal lifeworld. There were also examples of enjoying cooking with their children, crafting activities with children and

Kate spoke about growing butterflies from caterpillars and ladybirds who reflected that this contrasted with the threat of death from COVID-19 and said it was like “a growing adventure, helping something to live.”

Jenny described how her children made her and her husband lunch during their workday. Ellie’s children set up a garden pop-up restaurant, serving her and her husband a meal. Both spoke about these being cherished memories.

> “And, you know, and what was lovely to see the children as is. One day they came and we’ve made lunch and what they’ve done, they’ve taken all the salad stuff out of the fridge, put it in a bowl, put some ham in there with it and got some wraps and we had wraps with salad with carrots cut this thick. And so which was quite good. And we sat there and I felt very grateful because they realized they needed to help a little bit. But they were also, you know, they were young as well. They’re only six or seven at the time when we went into lockdown” (Jenny)

However, like the other lifeworlds, despite the cherished memories, the experience was also challenging but maybe some of the more difficult memories were harder to recall.

> “I think I obviously spent more time with my children than I do normally. I was very much a drop off mother, to the 8 am club, come back at 5.30/6 o’clock every night so to spend much more time with them was good, I think the fun times were really fun. So probably everything was exasperated, the worst times were really bad.” (Zara)

Likewise, Sasha said when considering back to the cherished times, “I don’t know whether you look back with rose-tinted glasses”.

Children and partner: Concern for their wellbeing

All participants described that the schools being closed had a negative impact on their children, which was a concern for them. Negative impacts were any concerns over whether the school closures had any long-lasting detrimental effects on their children. These negative impacts were on their well-being, academic, and social skills, and they are still present in the here-and-now.

Children:

Psychological wellbeing. The participants described changes in the psychological well-being of the children during the school closures and some are still concerned for them now. Zara described how her youngest son had changed from being “chilled” and “happy” to “really stressed” and angry:

> “a very chilled out, happy boy and now he’s become a little bit more highly strung…., he can really get stressed and that never happened before. I will never know if it would have happened anyway….., he can really get stressed and that never happened before. I will never know if it would have happened anyway…. he just can really that pent up, that absolute fury, and can’t calm down.” (Zara)

She expressed concern that because both herself and the children had “meltdowns” and having tried “different ways to get him to sit down” (for home-schooling) during the school-closures. Zara was worried that she could be responsible for this change and said, “I’ve had such bad times with my children, I just hope that it’s not had any lasting impact”. Similarly, Kate discussed how their daughters had become visibly more anxious being around other people and would say to her when out walking,” ‘Another human, another human’, and we’d like, you know, where we had to sort of cross the road or walk, you know, round people”. Like the other participants, she was concerned that the school closures and social-distancing measures had made her children socially anxious. However, she shared that for her children, this social anxiety had now dissipated.

Selene described finding her son distressed following going to the local park and refusing to leave his room for lunch. She found him “screaming” and “crying” in bed. She described how “he was really not happy. And he was like stuffs all swishing around my head. I don’t know what to think. I don’t know what to do”. As a mother, it made her realise how scared he was and how she needed to reassure him.

Jenny shared how, in SC2, her daughter’s well-being had deteriorated due to having to attend school remotely. At age six,, her daughter was refusing to do

any schoolwork, leaving the sofa and saying “I’ve had enough of this. I want to kill myself.” She described her daughter’s coping mechanisms as just wanting to eat crisps, and this has led to using “eating as an emotional response to things if she’s not feeling happy”. Following lockdown, her daughter was referred to the Children and adult mental health services (CAMHS) for support with her mental health.

Helen’s mother-in-law died from COVID-19 in hospital and her dog was put to sleep in the same week during lockdown. She spoke about the school closures affecting her son “dramatically” and them being left traumatised. She attributes this to them having been exposed to “death” due to the loss of his grandmother, their family dog. Death was not something they had not faced before and was “traumatic” for him. When they returned to school, in a mental health survey, her son responded that for him, COVID-19 was associated with death.

Academic. The participants acknowledged that home-schooling was not an equivalent to being in school and being taught by a teacher in a classroom.

> “I think the amount of, it just wasn’t even a comparable the amount of teaching they would get in a class compared to what they got from us, not remotely comparable” (Zara)

This lack of comparable teaching meant that there was a concern and anxiety around the children having missed out on important academic milestones. Helen described their child as being “lost in the education system” and having such “bad grades” that she wanted to hold one of her sons back a year:

> “And it was at such a formative period for his education that it’s had, you know, an adverse effect on his kind of ability to study and achieve, I think, academically” (Helen)

Specific academic skills lacking were described by Helen and her son’s English ability in terms of reading, writing, and spelling. She described how her children had “both suffered significantly because they didn’t have that ability to get the support”. However, Zara tried to put a positive spin on the lack of school by seeing it as similar to “people that take their children out of school who do a road trip, or a 6 month

and they're not being taught academics…they are not being taught, but having life experiences". Zara described how her son had improved in maths because he had watched a CBeebies maths show called 'Number Blocks' and taught himself successfully to be able to square numbers. Zara spoke about how there were some positive experiences when teaching her children:

> "But there were elements, moments where you know we did nice subjects together. We did something, one of them had to do read a book, they said do a little scene, we did a little film of it, voiced it, there were little moments, we were winning as a family," (Zara)

However, Zara also spoke about "it was awful during it [school closures]" and the "bad times" with her children.

Additional academic needs. These concerns about the loss of academic teaching were intensified by those participants whose children either had a special educational need and disability (SEND) diagnosis when the schools were closed or who received one soon after returning to school. Six out of the eight participants shared their children had a SEND diagnosis of one or more of the following: autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia. However, they all reported having the diagnosis as a positive because it meant there was a better understanding of their child's learning challenges and why school closures and attempted independent learning had been so hard.

> "So all lockdown just opened up lots of things that had probably been not ignored but kind of brushed under the carpet a little bit as the only way I can describe it, whereby it's like, Yeah, all children learn at different speeds, it'll be fine, work itself out. And actually what COVID did is exasperate the fact that my children needed more learning support….. And, you know, and as it turns out, they have got neurodiverse they both autistic and ADHD, they've got dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, they've got poor memory record, but then they've got amazing personalities, really funny, really clever, smart ideas and

> just got incredibly frustrated" (Jenny)

Selene shared that finding out her son had dyslexia meant that the school offered him additional support with a one-to-one teacher. She described how " stressful it was with them helping someone who's slightly dyslexic to do work online where they can't focus, and they weren't focusing, and he wasn't interested". Sasha praised the primary school for stepping in to support her son with his inattentive form of ADHD and her other son with dyslexia.

Lack of social contact. In addition to the social anxiety mentioned before, specifically, the negative impact of lack of social contact with their peers was shared by Zara and Sasha. They acknowledged that the impact was correlated with the child's age and personality.

> "the different ages have had different consequences for the younger one, whose age is that he was out of school very much when he's supposed to be learning about relationships and friends. And so he's really struggled to have like relationships with other kids as a result of the period being out of school…..They were just in the house by themselves, supposed to be work, you know, supposed to be doing that at work or joining an online learning and, you know, things like that. But it just didn't suit their personalities." (Zara)

Sasha described how the lack of social contact had negatively impacted her son's transition from year 6 to year 7 when he started secondary school. She believed it was due to his lack of social skills due to the school closures which led to him being bullied by his peers. On reflection, she felt his ASD could have also contributed, yet she also wondered whether any autistic traits had been intensified due to the social isolation when the schools were closed.

Partner: Adverse impact on their wellbeing. The consequence of having their partner experiencing adverse impacts on their wellbeing, led to the participants needing to increase their time and focus on supporting both their partners and the children. Daisy described how her husband's mental health always "takes a dip in Winter" due to the decrease in his work because of the weather and his job

being outside. However, in SC2, it deteriorated more significantly because he was unable to work during the second lockdown, and so had taken on the burden of home-schooling. Selene described how her husband struggled with working from home, and she remembered him “screaming” at his business partner. Helen, who had lost her mother-in-law and the family dog during the school closures, spoke of her grieving husband, who was struggling psychologically. He then became unwell with COVID-19, and his oxygen levels were dipping dangerously low. However, he refused to go to the hospital due to fears of his ethnicity being associated with higher death rates. Plus, he had recently observed his own mother’s life support being switched off due to COVID-19. Unwell partners added more stress to the participants experience, and this aspect will be explored further in their Personal world.

Family: Extended family

Extended family includes any family members outside the immediate family (so husband or children). The extended family members include grandparents (parents and parent-in-law) and uncles, aunts and cousins.

Grandparents – Separated but supported

All participants maintained regular contact with their parents and parents-in-law either by phone, online socials or meeting in the garden (when COVID-19 guidelines permitted). However, this contact was “not very nice” due to its limitations. There was also a sense that the participants needed to adhere to the rules of social distancing because they did not want to risk their parents getting COVID-19, whether they were shielding or not. Helen’s mother-in-law who died had been in regular contact with one of her children as they moved into her home to offer support. Helen shared that the family had felt that her staying there had been the source of her contracting COVID-19, which led to her death.

Ellie, Daisy and Helen spoke about how their parents were invaluable sources of support in their grandparenting role, even when limited to online. In SC2, when social bubbles were allowed, Ellie’s mother-in-law lived locally, so they created a bubble with her that offered childcare and home school support. Grandparenting

roles included entertaining and teaching the children so that the participants could work. Helen's parents were based in Australia and were retired teachers, so they stepped in to offer invaluable academic support for their children.

Extended family: Distant yet closer

Half of the participants spoke about how socialising online had meant they had increased social contact and became closer to members of the family who did not live in the UK. For Selene, they began regular meet-ups with family members who are in different cities in the US and Canada. They spoke of the different age-ranges of the family members who joined the Zoom and the benefit for their children of having social contact with their extended family:

> "So for me, that's one of the things I would say that the kids really bonded with people that they that they would bond with anyway. But they created another bond for themselves that they wouldn't have had. And that closeness with my like my uncle, which would be their great uncle, my mother's brother" (Selene)

She reported that these family Zoom's are still happening now. Sasha has an Aunt and Uncle in Cyprus, a brother and his family on the East coast of Australia, and her sister-in-law is in Perth, Australia. They organised weekly quiz's where they took it in turn to set the questions and described how "we were talking to each other regularly during the time that your kids of opportunity to be more social because I suppose it makes it easier. However, she has since stopped having these and has not spoken to her Aunt and Uncle in Cyprus since. Having Zoom calls was also a way for the participants to keep connected to their friends.

Friends: Family friends

Family friends are people who the participants maintained social contact with during the school closures, whether this be online, phone, video contact or when face to face meetings following restrictions were allowed.

Being entertainingly creative

Having social time with friends was described by all participants as important. This could be meeting for a walk in the local park (when permitted) or organising

Zoom meetups. Sasha described how having to come up with alternative ways for entertainment meant she said, “I don’t think I’ve ever laughed so much because again, you having to create an entertainment”. Examples of their creativity included quizzes where you had to re-create a well-known movie clip at home, share the photo and their friends had to guess which clip. She recognised that now that the lockdown and school closures are over that, they would not be pushed to be so creative in their social lives.

> “But I remember us having a week that you had to film your own versions of different film clips and then, like you would play it on the Zoom, and I’ve got this clip of S lying on the worktop, dressed up as Lilo in Fifth Element in nothing but a couple of bandages and a pink wig and just crying with laughter, trying to focus because it was a photo. He was crying with laughter as the kids just walked in, looked at their dad naked, apart from a couple of bank jet bandages and a pink wig, and just going, you two, and walking out again. It was just there’d be other reason why we would do that now. Yeah, we just we just wouldn’t do it.” (Sasha)

However, Ellie tried socialising with friends online but did not enjoy it. As an alternative, she and her husband found a way to connect with each other based on their enjoyment of music and dancing. When they were younger, they used to dance in the kitchen after a night out. Ellie expressed joy by laughing as she recounted the memory of them dancing in the kitchen together. It seemed like remembering this was a joyful memory.

> “in the end it was just me and my husband, we used to hang out together….. We used to watch [laughs]..we are really into our music there were a few DJs that would stream different parties, so we used to do that, and it was nice… dancing around the kitchen [laughs]” (Ellie)

Making comparisons

Having social time with friends was part of their experience for all participants except Ellie, who preferred to socialise with her husband one-to-one. However,

Selene also described how having online quizzes opened a window into other people's homes and relationships. Having this opportunity to view other families in their homes made her compare their lives which made her "question our own existence".

> "And it was really interesting watching how the kids interacted in the quiz because it was supposed to be a family quiz, how competitive people were, what it became, and how the men interacted within that family activity…… But it was very much seeing into people's homes and people's interactions that you kind of thought, well, they've got much nicer interaction than we do. Why is that because of this, or is it because of that?.....maybe like Instagram issue that you think people are having a better life than you the, but they're not really. But at that point, when you're questioning your own existence and your own make up and your own unit". (Selene)

Selene also remembered having quizzes with her work colleagues and being curious about being able to see into their homes and lives when, previously, this would have been "invisible to each other."

Friends

There was a difference in how the participants described their relationships with working mothers and mothers not in employment or furloughed who were either friends or not friends.

Friend or foe

Ellie described a distinction between her relationships with friends who were working mothers and those who were mothers not in paid employment or furloughed. She described how one friend who was also a local working mother became a significant part of supporting her wellbeing. Conversely, she described how her friendships with mothers not in paid employment or furloughed became more "distant". She described having support from her working mother friend as part of her "survival". During the first lockdown, she met a friend every day at around 6 am for a two-hour walk.

Initially, the purpose was to go to the supermarket for food and essentials. However, their walk became much more about planning their day, sharing their experiences, and feeling a sense of solidarity. Their walks offered her a chance to "clear my head" and "it was my time" and became "a lifesaver".

Selene spoke about how important her close friends who are Working mother and that speaking to them daily was a significant part of supporting her wellbeing. It gave her a chance to offload about any challenges and to experience a shared sense of solidarity with them their struggles.

> "we literally call each other every day and whinge and whine. And that's our therapy, just good support network. Well, it's a massive support network. And then you hear, this and that and the other and you know, kind of going, okay. So my issues aren't that bad. Yeah, that you've got this, that and the other. And then she says her issues aren't that bad, you know, kind of thing. So being able to, you know I think that is one of the things that we I don't think we should care and share with everybody, but we do have a sense that our experiences are not necessarily unique to us." (Selene)

Zara spoke about how setting up a WhatsApp group for working mothers was similarly supportive in terms of allowing them to share their challenges and normalise their struggles but also offer tips on how to manage working and home-schooling.

> "And actually, it helped so much to hear that, and that's the worst thing, you don't want to be the one to say it, but as soon as you say it, you can say that was me yesterday oh god, that was me last week, oh god I'm with you, you'll be alright needed was quite, you need other ppl, you felt like you were the only one, you are failing, and everyone else has got it nailed. And I think that's the pressure we put on ourselves as mothers. My kids doing well at school, have they got that you know that's what school tell you that they are all the same at the pace" (Zara)

Ellie shared, "I wouldn't really hang out with the non-working mothers". She described a rupture between the working mothers and mothers not in paid work,

particularly when the six-person outdoor socialising rule started, so choices had to be made about who was invited. She reported that other mothers not in paid employment were jealous of her close relationship with her working mother friend. She said the relationships have now healed. However, during the interview, she frequently highlighted a distinction between herself as a working mother and the mothers not in paid employment, whether she knew them or not, such as those mothers she saw on her daily trips out with the children. Ellie, Zara and Jenny shared how they were jealous and resentful of mothers who were not in paid employment when the schools were closed.

Ellie described how when going for their daily walk, it was hard to see other mothers who were in not in paid employment and therefore, could stay and enjoy their time outside without limits. This was in contrast to how she would have to cajole her children to go back home for work. She felt guilty, and remembering this was upsetting for her, and she became tearful when describing these memories:

> "But then there was always that feeling I'd see other mums who weren't working, and they could stay in the woods, but I'd have to say ', come on, I've got a meeting now' mummy needs to get back, we need to get back as mummy as got a meeting' [claps hands]. I remember I felt like all the time I was saying can you come back with me, and I felt so guilty that I was forcing them to through this pandemic but then I had to cut short what they were doing and take them home, sorry I'm getting upset". (Ellie)

Work: Colleagues and management

The theme of support (and lack of) was echoed in their experience and relationships with work colleagues and people in senior, management roles of their companies.

Support yet not supported

Five of the participants reported that on the surface, their work colleagues and management appeared to be offering support but the participants did not feel supported. This was linked to their perception of a lack of understanding of the

demands of being a Working mother. Therefore, there was a paradox in how the participants felt supported. The exceptions were Daisy, Selene and Sasha.

There was a sense from the participants that their workplace would talk about offering support, but the participants did not actually feel supported. For some, they spoke about the unfairness and increased demands (which will be expanded further in the Spiritual world chapter and their experience of roles). Ellie said, “I felt had the support of my boss” however, she also said that “”it was really tough because I felt that I would felt that I would fail if I asked to take time off.” When she expanded on the support she received from work, she explained that she did not feel recognised for how hard it was remaining committed to the company yet trying to find time to support her children, too. At times, this made her want to stop work and, specifically, to be furloughed.

> “nobody was saying oh well you don’t, you know, why don’t you spend the time with your children [laughs] because that was [shrugs shoulders], that was your responsibility and I work for a small business and they were very supportive and very kind. As I said my boss had children and he was supportive, but it’s just, it’s not, it’s not the same support, I don’t know, the recognition that you are trying to do two things at on it’s just impossible. We managed it, but it is impossible.” (Ellie)

Like other participants, she spoke about how her boss had a live-in nanny and a partner who did not work, so the pressure was less on him. Therefore, their bosses experience was different to there is having any support at home. There was a sense from the participants that their work colleagues paid “lip service” to them about how hard it was working at home whilst the schools were closed and that it was their choice to have children, but given it was not their choice for the schools to close, this was presented as an inequality between them and their colleagues without children or their bosses with live-in help, grown up children. Zara referenced how senior bosses were in “their big houses in the countryside with swimming pools”. A common theme was around feeling under pressure and needing a break, but not

asking for time off.

> “But COVID was a proper ‘this is totally unfair, and I can’t do anything about it’…..I think, I also think that even when people think they have a moment of sympathy for working mothers, it doesn’t last beyond a comment -oh, it’s really tough, well done, but it must be really hard, anyway, moving on, have you done x, y, z. So I know my boss appreciated that I had children, but it didn’t change anything about how she would ask for them. The only way it would change the situation is if I said I can’t do it because I’ve got to look after the kids, and she would say so when can you do it? But I barely did that.” (Ellie)

A similar sense of inequality between themselves and senior members of the team was described by Kate, whose role included visiting patients in their homes. She spoke of her resentment that the senior medical professionals were choosing to do their appointments online or over the phone, whereas her role was to see the patients. Then she was being asked to visit other people’s patients who were not prepared to do home visits.

From a positive perspective, Daisy described how the shared sense of having to find a new way to work remotely and the challenges of having to adapt their roles and company’s offering led to an increased sense of camaraderie:

> “the leadership team that I sit on, we really came together…..and became much more effective as a leadership team during that period.” (Daisy)

All participants spoke of a spectrum of different emotions in their physical and social lifeworlds. They will be explored further when looking at their lived experience using a lens of their Personal worlds.

The personal world: Distressed and delighted

In the current study, emotions are defined as how someone experiences situations they find personally significant (American Psychological Association, APA, 2023). Although using the personal world was a deductive theme in the study, emotions were inductive as they came directly from the participants lived experience

and were shared without any specific question or prompting. Emotions will be reported both as semantic (so their actual words) and latent (so my interpretation of their meaning). The overarching theme of emotions in the Personal world was paradoxes that run throughout and are highlighted as part of the latent aspect of the data.

Guilt: Available yet unavailable

In the context of the current study, guilt is defined as the experience of painfully evaluating having done (or thought) something wrong whilst wanting to do something designed to undo or mitigate this wrong (APA, 2022). The participants spoke of feeling guilty for being unavailable to support their children, whilst paradoxically having more time at home available due to working at home. However, they also reported feeling guilty for not being able to work enough either.

Ellie spoke in detail about how she experienced guilt around her ability to be available to her children and for her work and having to make choices about which she was able to prioritise. She described how her children would come to her while working in the kitchen.

> “What can I have to eat? What can I do? What? and it was always, I’d be trying to work. and I’d get a little frustrated, and then I’d start to feel guilty then, as they are my children, they need me, why am I prioritising my work over my children?” (Ellie)

To try and mitigate the guilt, Ellie described prioritising spending an hour or two every day with them as a priority. However, this led to further guilt that she could not spend unlimited time with them as she needed to return to work. Remembering their inability to solve the paradox of working and mothering, she became visibly upset when recounting this experience.

> “So that’s why I sort of felt that every day they needed at least, not just one hour, but two hours where we’d go out and just have my time, and just take them to the woods. But then there was always that feeling I’d see other mums who weren’t working, and they could stay in the woods, but I’d have to say, ‘come on, I’ve got a meeting now’ mummy needs to get back, we need to get

> back as mummy as got a meeting' [clapping hands]. I remember I felt like all the time I was saying can you come back with me, and I felt so guilty that I was forcing them to through this pandemic, but then I had to cut short what they were doing and take them home, sorry I'm getting upset" (Ellie)

From a work perspective, her guilt was about not being able to spend as much time as her work colleagues and that she could not keep up with the demands of her role. Ellie described how "I wasn't doing all of the work that I should be doing….I felt this guilt that I wasn't getting through everything. So, if I took time off, then it would make things worse." From a latent perspective, this quote illustrates her experience of being caught experiencing the paradox of guilt that she cannot mitigate. For example, it starts with her describing the experience of being guilty of being unable to keep up with the demands of her work and ends with a reflection that she could not take time off to spend time with her children. Other participants described similar paradoxical experiences, which was summed up succinctly by one Selene:

> "And then you feel guilty about that.
>
> Then you feel guilty about the kids, then you feel guilty…….there was a lot of guilt." (Selene)

The participants experience of the paradoxical roles of working, mothering and teaching will be explored in more detail in the Spiritual world chapter.

Furlough and freedom envy

A re-occurring theme in the participants experience was feelings of jealousy and resentment towards people who were not working during the school closures. These included people on furlough and mothers not in paid employment. Jealousy is defined as a negative emotion in which someone experiences resentment towards another who appears to have or take away (or is likely to take away) someone or something they want (APA, 2022).

For Ellie, feeling jealousy or resentment was focused on others having more freedom than her and not having to juggle the roles of working, mothering or teaching. Similar to guilt, there was a paradox in how she described her jealousy as

it was juxtaposed with the joy of being out with her children when it was sunny:

> "Yeah, I look back sometimes, and it sort of feels as it was a nice time because it was really sunny, but then there was pang of jealousy of people who weren't working." (Ellie)

On the one hand, she described how she enjoyed the schools being closed when the sun was shining, but this also led to a tension of jealousy that other people could enjoy it more than her. As a working mother, she acknowledged, "I know I choose to work". Zara described finding it hard to hear people who "complained," such as mothers not in paid employment or on furlough, and said, "I think companies used the furloughing to save money. They did not use it to save the people who were struggling".

The feeling of jealousy was also linked to a sense of unfairness and inequality both towards their own work colleagues who had bigger homes or live-in help, working mothers who had been placed on furlough and mothers not in paid employment. Zara described her jealousy by saying "I mean, I, I just couldn't, I was just so jealous, so it's like I can't believe it". particularly citing those who had moved to the countryside whilst she was in her smaller home in London. Zara also spoke about being jealous of those parents who were key workers and able to send their children to school, and outraged of parents who convinced the schools to allow them to go back even if they were not key workers. In the first school closure, Ellie described wanting to be furloughed because she felt like "I can't do it anymore". She viewed parents not in paid employment "as lucky", and on reflection, she spoke about "homeschooling being hard even if you are not working but have some empathy for me".

Being upset and joyful

Participants spoke of the paradoxical experiences of being upset, grateful and joyful during the school closures. The definition of being upset in the current study is an emotional state of feeling unhappy, from mild to extreme intensity and usually aroused by the loss of something highly valued (APA, 2022). Joy and gratefulness in the current study are defined as a positive "emotional state marked by enthusiasm, eagerness or anticipation, and general arousal. (APA, 2022)

During the interviews, around half of the participants became visibly upset, shedding some tears or reported feeling upset. Remembering when the schools were closed evoked sadness in their lived experience, particularly remembering the impact on her children and the stress of "juggling" the roles of worker, mother and teacher. The experience of juggling is explored in the Spiritual world chapter. Using the APA's definition of sadness, all participants experienced loss on all levels: a loss of freedom in all four worlds. Loss in each world is explored in more detail under the physical, social and spiritual dimensions.

Paradoxically to sadness, all participants described feelings of joy and gratefulness about having more time with their family when working at home and the schools were closed. For example, the participants described having "loved" the time with their children, particularly going for their daily walks and crafting activities; "so to spend much more time with them was good, I think the fun times were really fun" having more time led to being "totally positive….brilliant", it was "a really nice experience" and the "lovely, warm, fuzzy feeling I have about, we were all together in our house".

From a working perspective, several participants described their excitement over the opportunities that opened up when the schools closed. Ellie's company were able to advertise on TV for the first time, which she described as "the excitement of the business I'm working for suddenly growing overnight because there was more of a need for the services I was providing." Several participants spoke about they enjoyed challenge of change to their working roles when lockdown started. Zara described a sense of excitement in having to rise to the challenge of a new way of working, saying, "I would say that I'm, I think I'm quite resilient, and I really enjoy change." Daisy described in more detail how much she enjoyed the challenge of keeping a business going due to the "novelty" of a global pandemic,

> "We're leading an organisation of people, and we're all in a global pandemic. And we're everybody's been sent home. How do we keep the business going? You know, so actually, even from a work side of things, it was strange and a bit of novelty and kind of enjoyable." (Daisy)

However, they all spoke of the challenges and difficulties of their experience working and home-schooling. Most participants mentioned the theme of rose-tinted glasses “I don’t know whether you look back with rose-tinted glasses” and was contrasted with their feelings of anxiety and fear when the schools were closed.

Death anxiety: A real threat

In the current study, it uses the APA (2022) definition of fear as “a basic, intense emotion aroused by the detection of imminent threat, involving an immediate alarm reaction that mobilizes the organism by triggering a set of physiological changes”. The physiological aspects of fear are explored in the Physical world chapter. In the personal world, the experience of fear is related as a psychological emotion.

In the first school closures, Ellie described a fear around getting COVID-19 because of having limited or no immunity as there was no vaccine. Her father-in-law was shielding at the time as he has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), a group of conditions of the lungs which cause breathing difficulties (NHS, 2023). Therefore, her family did not see him due to a fear and risk of passing on COVID-19. Interestingly, she did not vocalise any further about her fear of anyone contracting COVID-19. However, her fear could be interpreted as a fear of causing death or harm to herself and her family, as in the first school closure, the death rates were rising, vaccines had not been fully rolled out, and there was limited knowledge about the virus.

As discussed in the Physical World chapter, Kate was visiting patient’s homes and was fearful that she was bringing home a potentially lethal virus which might infect her husband and children. Helen spoke about her fear of losing her mother at the start of the pandemic. Her mother was 68 years old and working in the Accident and Emergency department, so she was in a high-risk environment and age group. She spoke about her mother being in a “in a very real sense because of the immediate danger”. Her mother survived, but it was her mother-in-law who had her life support machine turned off due to contracting COVID-19. She described how the trauma of

losing a loved one made her experience during lockdown much more traumatic,

> "the period was just more traumatic for us because we were grieving……. there was like trauma happening around us because we were in constant fear for our parents, and sadly for my husband's mum had dire consequences too" (Helen)

Fears were also shared about the need to get ready in preparation for the imminent lockdown and to ensure that there was food in the house. Selene shared how, due to fearing supermarkets running out of food, she began planning how to ensure her children did not become frightened or without food, Initially, she approached it with humour but then realised it was becoming real and "getting a bit scary" as her husband asked her to start preparing for the lockdown.

> "I started thinking in my head, What have we got in the freezer? What food have we got at home? We can make this work even for three months, four months, whatever. And then I was like, this is getting ridiculous. How many tins do I need?..... And, you know, we all joked about this, and all this started coming back to me and, and I was like, okay, I need to go get tinned tuna. I needed to do that. But the kids won't have sauerkraut. You know, we need vitamin C. So I ordered a whole load of Lamberts, vitamin C stuff, and I don't normally order stuff online." (Selene)

Worry about whether there was enough food in the household was shared by other participants, who described the shortages of food as explored in the Physical section.

Kate spoke about how she found the daily government updates "fear-inducing", and this was made worse by them asking the public to stay at home and protect the NHS. However, she was part of the NHS, visiting people's homes to look after them but putting herself in danger.

> "And then these constant news updates, which were really heavy when they and they were they were fear inducing…. But then it was like, you know, you have to stay at home, stay at home and then protect the NHS. And then it's like, well, we are the NHS, we have to go out. And it's like, so I can't, you

know, stay at home as such in that way." (Kate)

She spoke about her fear of bringing COVID-19 back to her home and how she was catastrophising what could happen about making her family ill,

> "I mean, the last thing you want to do is to bring this unknown thing into your home and then your children and partner, become ill because of it…..It was scary, you know, you were keeping your kids at home to protect them, but then you were having to go out." (Kate)

In terms of going out of the home, there was a fear of being near other people. Ellie talked about being "scared" and "anxious" about any of her children touching things outside the house (like at the playgrounds) and being vigilant about her children washing their hands. Kate shared how she became known as the "alcohol gel queen". She used so much antibacterial gel that she was worried about being stopped by the police when driving to visit patients due to the strong smell of alcohol in her car. Selene talked about a fear of being in the local park in the afternoon, as it was busy, and she "started getting a bit scared". Early in the school closures, Sasha realised she was waking regularly through the night and checking the latest news and statistics of infection and death rates, but for her psychological well-being, she realised she had to stop this behaviour.

Nearly half of the participants spoke about a mild level of financial concern. Sasha who ran her own business lost her clients at the start of lockdown, Jenny was made redundant, and Helen's contract expired. Sasha committed to keeping on working and her business recovered by SC2, Jenny and Helen both found new roles. Ellie described how having the children home for even one day triggers a fear about if we go into another and said, "How the hell did I do that for all those months?" Nearly all participants spoke of their frustration, disappointment, and resentment towards the government, teachers, and school systems.

Authority: Lacking governance

Lacking governance relates to the confusion, criticism and resentment that the participants experienced towards the government guidelines, schools and

teachers. As mentioned before, Kate spoke about how working in the NHS, she felt confused by the contradictory messages from the UK government saying, ‘Stay at home: Protect the NHS’ yet she was going out to work. Participants shared their disappointment in the lack of organisation from the government’s Education department in coordinating a national response and the lack of clarity in supporting the schools for a plan for when they were closed. Helen, Selene and Sasha described how this led to autonomy in how each school managed the closures, but the consequence was an inequality in the quality of teaching their children received. Differences were highlighted between children in independent school’s and state primary schools but also within both sectors. From their experiences, there did not seem to be one to deliver more quality teaching.

Teaching online was criticised by participants for not being able to support their children to learn effectively and also for allowing the children to join lessons yet be engaged with other activities. Selene described her exasperation and disappointment at how one teacher was critical of her son’s lack of progress but had been unaware that he was speaking to his friends and playing Minecraft and the consequence of the school closures on his psychological well-being.

> “So at this point I could I just could not stop myself telling the teacher that he’s actually been playing Minecraft during lessons and you haven’t actually realized. And if you pointed this out to me months, you know, couple of weeks earlier when you were told you should have been told that he’s crying at home and he’s stressed with all of this, then I could have figured it out and I was, I was pulling my hair out trying to figure out what the child’s doing……. So normally, that responsibility would be the schools.” (Selene)

There was a sense that some teachers adapted better to the need to teach online, but overall, it was a challenge for their primary school children to concentrate. Overall, their experience was of “chaos” and that the children were struggling to concentrate.

> “You know, it was I just remember looking over the shoulder of [son], you

> know, the year four lessons and, you know, all of his friends on the screen in their little boxes on the teams meeting, not many of them seemed to really be concentrating on what the teacher was saying. And [son] was barely concentrating himself. So, I think it was definitely more difficult the second time around for us, for sure." (Daisy)

All participants spoke of the increase in pressure and demands on home-schooling from the teachers in the second school closure.

The spiritual world: Blending and compartmentalising

Mother, worker and teacher roles

Deurzen-Smith (1984) describes the spiritual world as the dimension where we find our meaning and uses a metaphor of putting together the puzzle pieces of ourselves. For some, this could be about following the dogma of religion or another prescribed worldview. However, for this study, I used Deurzen-Smith's concept of how others discover their own meaning more personally and secularly. In the spiritual lifeworld, we can move between holding a tension between purpose and triviality, hope and despair.

Making the invisible visible

Making the invisible visible relates to how during the school closures, the mothering role of the participants' lives which had previously been unseen, became more visible. For example, they attended online work meetings from their homes whilst their children were being home-schooled. Prior to school closures, the participants described how their work and mothering roles were separate. However, when the schools closed, their home life and being a mother became visible to their work colleagues. Ellie, Zara and Daisy described how they spoke openly to their colleagues at the start of meetings about the challenges of having the children at home and trying to work. Most gave examples of their children interrupting their online meetings either by coming to ask for something or for Zara, who worked for a clothes retailer, their son joined in one meeting making his own masks. These interruptions were sometimes without warning, but for most participants it offered an

opportunity to demonstrate how they had to juggle the roles of worker, mother and teacher.

> “I used to make sure that they came and said it in front of people so people could see because not everyone would have children. So my children would ask me, and people could see what this was like” (Zara)

Ellie described that pre-pandemic, for her work colleagues, any challenges of being a working mother were invisible. Therefore, she actively wanted her colleagues to know how hard it was having the children at home and working. However, her experience was that being “visible” as a working mother meant that she felt her work colleagues viewed her differently because she was not “always available” due to having the children at home. Zara was able to reflect on how her role as a working professional changed and how this impacted her credibility in the workplace:

> “Your credibility, the barrier of your professionalism is not there anymore [laughs] is it when you’re trying to work (.) And I suppose you, I didn’t conduct, I can’t, we’re all quite friendly with in my workplace as its quite a small workplace and I didn’t conduct myself in the same way I would in work because the barriers were down. “ (Ellie)

She recognised how she presented herself had changed because the separation between working and mothering had been removed. She said “I wouldn’t say I was in crisis” but it was clear having the barriers removed was a challenge to juggling both her working and her mothering roles.

For other participants, there was a positive aspect to having their working and mothering roles made more visible. Selene spoke about how she overheard her husband speaking to friends and colleagues about her working in the NHS being visibly proud of her NHS role. This made her feel like her working role was worthwhile and valued by him, whereas previously, she felt this was not been the case. She also spoke about how before lockdowns, her children only knew about the Pharmacists who worked in chemists and dispensed medication. However, after seeing her work at home, one son asked her about her work. She described how

he was impressed when he realised she was responsible for writing papers and National guidelines for medications.

Daisy spoke positively about her work colleagues having more visibility in her home life. She felt that it offered an opportunity to positively role model the juggling of being a mother and worker. Daisy spoke about this offering a more "human" aspect to being a Working mother, which was more "authentic" and invited empathy. They described how this role modelling received positive feedback within their company,

> "I think actually my ability to do that and certainly the necessity of doing that during the lockdowns has perhaps had a positive on my working life in the sense that people want to work for leaders who are human and can kind of empathize with their situation. So that was myself and a number of other people sitting on the leadership team that I sit on who have similar children…. And during the pandemic I was being able to role model, you know, just be vulnerable and share the difficulties that we were also having with trying to juggle work and home schooling. You know, we were we made a deliberate point to be open about that with our teams and the feedback we got from being able talk about that and demonstrate that was very, very positive." (Daisy)

All participants spoke about the challenges of "trying to juggle" to manage work, schooling and mothering demands.

Being a juggler: Juggling and struggling

In the current study, juggling is defined by the metaphor of keeping several balls in the air at once and trying to manage several activities at the same time. In the Oxford English Dictionary (2024), they offer an example of juggling a career whilst raising children. However, juggling in the current study describes how the participants' task was to continuously manage the roles of worker, mother and teacher simultaneously. Struggling is defined in the current study as "striving to achieve or attain in the face of difficulty" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024).

Preparation was a key part of being able to keep juggling the roles of worker, mother and teacher. Ellie described how, in the evenings, she would google for ideas to keep her children busy, using Amazon to deliver craft activities and organising a "snack box" to "pre-empt them getting hungry, getting bored, and giving them a list of "things to do, and getting them to write a list of what they wanted to do". Keeping them busy and fed meant she could focus more on her work without interruption. Jenny described how she would prepare for their daily walks; she would make sure the children each had a backpack with water and food to ensure the time outside of the house did not have to be curtailed. The preparation also allowed her time to make work calls whilst they all walked in their local park.

Another aspect of preparation was how the participants created daily schedules. These involved organising time in their day when they were not responsible for their children. All recounted how the demands from the school in the first and second closures were different. Ellie and her husband adjusted their workday so that they started earlier and finished later. In a 12-hour workday, they would each spend 2 hours with the children. In the second school closure, the demands of schooling increased. With having learnt about the challenges of the previous school closures, Ellie began a childcare support bubble with another working mother. They would have each other's children for four hours. The challenge was that for half the day, they had four children and were trying to work, but for the other four hours, the benefit was having no children to care for or support with schooling. She said working with four children at home was hard, but it was worth it as it meant four child-free hours for work. Zara spoke about how if the schools closed again, she would set up a similar arrangement amongst her working mother friends. Despite findings ways to manage working and looking after their children, all participants spoke of their struggle to juggle their roles and how hard it was.

> "So, on the whole, it was just more of a survival really the reality of it, homeschooling and working was, it was just, really hard." (Zara)

Jenny spoke of feeling like she had "failed" in the roles of worker and mother when

the schools were closed,

> “the word that comes to my mind is it was a complete and utter nightmare….. And I think I failed on everything I felt in terms of being supportive to my partner husband, my children, and my work colleagues.” (Jenny)

All participants spoke about the challenges of simultaneously juggling the roles of worker, mother, and teacher.

> “This half and half, this upstairs downstairs, I’d just pop down, how’s it going, are you doing it, oh ok, I’m back onto another zoom and I think that was really unhelpful for them in hindsight. I just kind of like run downstairs and have you done your homework? But then it got to, I mean, the worst bit, was where I’m trying to have a meeting and the children are coming in and crying” (Zara)
>
> “I was doing multi things simultaneously, I think is the only way I can describe it. So, if I wanted to do some exercise, but I had a call, and I had childcare responsibilities, and they were well, they had one zoom call a week and a list of work that they needed to do, and it was, I don’t know, it was kind of like, okay, can go for a walk. I’ve got an hour and a half got a call to do in that hour and a half and it was a one-to-one.” (Jenny)

The challenges of being a working mother during the school closures was described by all. These included juggling demands in their working role, being available as a mother and childcare responsibilities such as providing food, overseeing behaviour, offering reassurance and comfort, entertainment and ensuring daily exercise and providing a teacher role to support them with their schoolwork.

Due to the challenges and pressures on their companies during lockdown, most participants spoke of the increasing demands placed on them from their employers, which led to pressure on juggling the demands of being a worker, mother, and teacher. Jenny aptly summed up the juggling that the participants described.

> “the expectations of my employer was shot through the roof. They had, you know, well aware that, yeah, you’ve got children today, but you’ve got to do this as well. So I was finding that I was literally working the minute I woke up

> in the morning, I was responding to messages and emails from around the world and running around trying to print off whatever the kids needed to do, try and see if they would do on their own what, you know, verbally they didn't. to jump on a call to come out to try and do food, and honestly, I was exhausted." (Jenny)

Regarding the mothering role, providing their children with healthy and nutritious meals was a priority for several of the participants. However, even when cooking they were still taking work calls and planning how to manage the following day's challenges.

> "But most, most of the time I would be still on a call and I'm chopping away and cooking, you know, bolognaise from scratch and stuff. There's, you know, healthy eating was really important for us as a family. I can't just cook because I need to make sure I'm maximizing time. There's other stuff that needs to be done and that's planning for the next day" (Jenny)

Part of the planning was also about considering how to manage their childcare responsibilities because their children were too young to complete the tasks set by their teachers independently.

> "I've got a call, who is going to be with the kids? Because the kids are too young to just on with it themselves. But I think now, I'd think they'd probably be alright, maybe not the youngest, the oldest, she's a completely independent worker. Even my 9-year-old child, she's an independent worker, but at the time, they all needed someone to sit next to them and do their work." (Zara)

The challenges of supporting the children with their schoolwork were remembered by all participants and experienced as "the biggest challenges". There was a significant increase in the demand for homeschooling in the second school closure because they felt that schools and teachers had become more organised. However, they also described how the "novelty" of the initial lockdowns had worn off and juggling the worker, mother and teacher roles was now a "normality". This ongoing school

closures contributed to their concerns about the negative impacts on their children spoken about in the Social World chapter. Most spoke of the need to print out multiple sheets of tasks for their children at the start of each day. Zara described how "we'd print all the, so much printing, so much paper was used. We'd print off all the pieces of paper, and they would work their way through it".

All participants spoke about the difficulties whilst trying to support their children in a teaching role. From "resistance" and "regular battles" to having to "manhandle" them to sit down. Fulfilling the teacher role was a significant source of stress and conflict. The regular battles were usually linked to having limited time to support them with their schoolwork as they had to try and fit this time in during their work days. Daisy remembers allocating their lunch hour to help their children with schoolwork and how the "time pressure" made it "more difficult…pressurised". She also described how she would come from being involved in a demanding work meeting and would still be pre-occupied with how to solve the work issues but now had to go straight from being a worker to being both a mother and a teacher,

> "Mummy's going to try and help you with some stuff'. And they were like 'well it's lunchtime now.' 'Well quickly eat your lunch and then we're going to get on and try and do you know the stuff that you didn't get to finish in the morning or maybe stuff that we were supposed to do yesterday that we didn't get to, you know? So I always trying to play catch up with the things that the school had said that they ought to have been doing or had done the day before. And knowing that I had a meeting starting at 2:00 at the on the dot that, you know, especially it could have been a meeting that I was chairing. So it's not an option to be late, you know, that definitely would have made it more stressful putting the extra time pressure because it was just a window was the only window that I could, you know, devote to the home-schooling objectives." (Zara)

As described in the Personal world, this constant juggling led to guilt and conflict over not being able to fulfil all (or any) roles well. Zara shared, "I never checked one piece of my daughter's maths work in a year, I never checked, I didn't have time,

I didn't have time, when was I going to check it?". The sense of conflict was because they needed to be working, and in this limited time, their children needed to complete their schoolwork so they could return to working. Ellie felt that being a mother was a "hindrance to her career" during the school closures, because she was struggling with school and supporting her children at home. Despite the guilt and conflict, the participants all recognised the choice they had made to be a working mother, which meant they were "always on" and a sense of "always working". Achieving this demonstrated a "resilience" and a determination and choice to be a "functioning working mother" but this brought a sense of never having enough time to do all of it,

> "So I suppose as working mothers, we kind of have our own undoing because….I want to be all in……if you want to be a functioning working mother I suppose as they grow up. I think I need to be a more involved working mother. But it's difficult to give 120% at home because the home life you value more and give 100% at work, and you've got your social life and your own personal wellbeing." (Selene)

Jenny spoke about how she only stopped trying to juggle all the demands when she became ill with COVID-19 and was too unwell to function. She described how being "always on" is a strength of being a working mother, but paradoxically leads to a sense of never being able to stop, which is a strength of a Working mother but also their "downfall",

> "I'm not good at switching off I'm really bad….you know I think just being really bad at switching off but being an excellent multi-tasking working mother. And it's all our strengths and our superpower, but it's also our downfall." (Jenny)

Despite these challenges and difficulties in the worker, mother and teacher roles, all spoke about the positive benefits of these roles again, often using the phrase "rose-tinted spectacles".

Rose-tinted spectacles

Rose-tinted spectacles in the current study is understood as seeing or experiencing the past in a positive light, often remembering it as better than it was having the experience. Zara spoke about how having different roles during the school

closures was a positive. They described how moving between working and mothering roles offered a way to separate home and work because taking on a teacher role was a “bonus” because they were distracted from their work. Daisy reported that blending work and home changed their previous way of being a Working mother. Pre-pandemic, they managed their demands by compartmentalising their working and mothering roles. However, they reflected that separation was not necessarily a beneficial way to live and was a less human way to live,

> “a certain level of ability to blend, to survive, you know, because you can’t we can’t be robots that are operate in this compartment for this block of time in a day and this compartment in a different block of time in a day. It just doesn’t work that way.” (Daisy)

As reported in the Social World chapter, the most significantly positive aspect of blending roles at home was that the participants spent more time with their family, but this led to increased pressure on them and less time for themselves. For Selene, remembering that they survived seemed a positive reflection on the experience of the merging of their roles, and they reiterated the sentiment of other participants who had a determination to make it work when the schools were closed,

> “It’s actually quite a positive thing looking back at how we, as you said, how did you survive? We [Working mother] always just kind of make do, don’t we?” (Selene)

Selene’s statement seems to sum up the theme of rose-tinted spectacles because looking back it is positive, but in the reality at the time, they just had to make working and being a mother when the schools were closed work. All participants, (except for Helen and Daisy) reported their lived experiences as positive but recognised they could be positively skewed as they remembered back. Terms such as rose-tinted spectacles, rose-tinted glasses or silver linings were used all participants when describing their remembered past.

Summary

In each of the lifeworlds, the main theme of the participants holistic experience

was of paradox. There was no clear ‘black and white’ theme of positive or negative, conflict or balance of being a Working mother during the school closures. The overarching theme found in the data was of a never-ending movement of being both-and rather than either-or. The following discussion will consider how these findings can add to the existing understanding of working mother’s experience during the school closures and on a more general contextual basis.

Discussion

The four existential lifeworlds: A holistic frame to explore lived experience

The four existential lifeworlds provided an existential frame throughout the current study. The frame was used when reviewing the existing literature and for collecting and analysing the data. The four lifeworlds were used as a frame because they offer a holistic way to explore the working mother's lived experience from physical, social, personal and spiritual perspectives. However, the following discussion aims to draw the findings and learnings about working mother's experience back into one holistic lens rather than through each of the four lifeworlds. Taking this holistic approach illustrates the four lifeworlds are interconnected (Deurzen, 2015). The discussion meets the aim of exploring the lived experience of the working mother's from a holistic perspective and therefore, will not discuss personal, physical, social and spiritual worlds as exclusively separate experiences. The discussion will demonstrate how the current study expands the current knowledge of working mother's and their experience of the schools being closed because it offers a unique existential lens. Demonstrating its commitment with the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the study, the discussion maintains my pluralist underpinnings to research. Therefore, it is acknowledged that the current study is only one way to explore, analyse, and discuss the lived experiences of the working mothers when the schools were closed. Therefore, the discussion will demonstrate how the study's findings have similarities, and differences, and challenge the existing literature into Working mother's.

The aim of the study was to hold a loose existential frame to capture and analyse the data. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore holistically about the participants experiences in all four lifeworlds. However, there were no pre-set questions. The participants did not describe their experiences as distinctly separate phenomena or an either-or but spoke about their experience holistically. Therefore, this adds support to avoiding seeing the four life worlds

as separate but more as a complex, interwoven way of understanding human experience.

Deurzen (2016) suggests a pyramind-type hierarchy in how the four life worlds are experienced. She places the physical world at the base, with the social world next, then personal world and the spiritual world at the top. This is consistent with Heidegger's (1962) proposal that the body is the main contact of being-in-the-world.

However, in this study, there were marginally more findings and themes in the social world, rather than the physical world Considering the context of the study, where participants were prevented from social contact due to lockdown and social distancing policies, it could have skewed the focus on the 'loss' of social contact as part of their experience when the schools were closed. Future research could explore this phenomenon further. Despite this finding, the overall theme of the working mother's experience was of paradox. The study found that the participants were determined to make their seemingly opposing roles as worker, mother and teacher function when the schools were closed. From an existential perspective, their commitment could be understood as the result of the energy and motivation coming from the opposed poles of the paradox of their lived experience. Deurzen (2015) would explain this being charged by the opposing forces which invokes passion from their paradoxes and motivated the participants to juggle, struggle, survive and thrive

Paradoxes: Holding the tension

The overarching theme of the participants lived experience during the school closures was paradox. Deurzen (2015) highlights how life is "riddled with contradictions" (p. 1), citing that living includes sleeping and waking, confidence and uncertainty, belonging and being alone, sickness and health, birth and death. In the context of the participants experiences, Deurzen's definition of paradoxes which seems most appropriate is how "the tensions and contradictions of life will never resolve and that they do not have either-or answers" (2015, p.19). Deurzen describes that human living is a never-ending movement of highs and lows. Being exposed to these contradictions can "easily swing us out of our precarious balance"

(2015, p.1) which can push us towards a sense of impending doom. By facing the contradictions of their existence when the schools were closed, the participants were pushed towards the uncertainty of an abyss, yet all found the “inner courage and confidence to tackle life in a new way” (Deurzen, 2015, p.5). The concept of Nietzsche’s Übermensch (Superman) will be used to illustrate their courage to cross the abyss when the schools were closed.

Paradoxes were seen within and across their four lifeworlds: personal, social, spiritual and physical which highlights their interconnected and interwoveness. There were an experience of being restricted and free in their physical world, connected and disconnected in their social world, distressed and delighted in their personal world and fusing and splitting in their spiritual world. These paradoxes are illustrated by the subthemes highlighted in the findings. Paradoxes in the context of the current study are seen as extending the existing literature, which tends to focus on conflict (Cooklin et al., 2014) and balance (Thomas & Pulla, 2022) in work-life. The existing literature seems to suggest that for working mothers, there is an either-or position as a worker and a mother which needs to be resolved by finding a balance. From an existential perspective, solving conflict or finding balance seems reductionist as it negates the dynamic flux of holding the two opposing roles in paradox. In the current study, none of the participants spoke about seeking balance. However, their lived experience indicated a constant movement between opposing states in their four lifeworlds. Therefore, it is argued that a more dynamic and appropriate term to understand the working mother’s holistic experience in the current study is being in a constant sway or being-in-sway rather than conflict or balance.

Working mothers: Being-in-sway

In a blog for Forbes, Federman (2021) used the phrase work-life sway. He argued that work-life sway is a metaphor which evokes a sense of constant movement and acknowledges the impossibility of having a work-life balance. Being-in-sway seems an appropriate metaphor for the holistic experience for the participants during the school closures. In this instance, sway means **“**to fluctuate or

veer between one point, position, or opinion and another" (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Therefore, sway speaks to the participant's lived experience of moving between being restricted and free in their physical world, connected and disconnected in their social world, distressed and delighted in their personal world and fusing and splitting in their spiritual world. Therefore, the term being-in-sway encapsulates their experience using an existential perspective for the constant movement whilst the holding the tension of one or more opposites. For the participants, moving from an either-or position meant that a new authenticity to their identity emerged.

Being authentic

Most participants spoke of their mothering role becoming more visible to their work colleagues. The visibility of being a mother led to a more authentic self in their work lives. Daisy spoke of how having the children interrupt her online meetings during the school closures made her work colleagues see how she was both a worker and a mother. Before the pandemic, she kept both her work and home life separate. However, now that her mothering role has become visible, she felt that colleagues became more understanding about juggling being a working mother. She described how it benefits her now because there is an appreciation and more permissive culture to work more flexibly.

Daisy described how the school closures created a more "authentic" self and how important it is for her to provide a role model for other working parents in her team. She argued that demonstrating vulnerability and "bringing the human" in leadership was beneficial for her and the company culture. Ellie also spoke about deliberating about allowing her children to interrupt her online work meetings. She chose to consciously let her work colleagues see how she was juggling motherhood and work. Unlike Daisy, initially Ellie felt like having the barriers removed between them work and home damaged her credibility and led to her being overlooked for a pay rise in 2020-2021. However, Ellie reported that post-lockdown, she has received a pay rise and a promotion since the pandemic. The current study illustrated there is more to these working mother's lived experience than just a 'return to the 1950s

housewife" that the UK media reported (The Observer, 2020).

Being-in-sway: Going beyond conflict and balance

The findings and proposed term being-in-sway expand the understanding of working mothers which goes beyond the concepts of work-life conflict and work-life balance explored in the studies of Cooklin et al. and Thomas and Pulla. However, it is understood that the sway for other working mother's may have differed from those in the current study, mainly single mothers.

All participants described a determination, no matter what, to make it work for them, their children, their company, and their husbands. Participants were committed to finding a way to make the seemingly impossible paradoxical situation of working whilst the schools were closed work. Helen spoke about the constant movement between her desk and looking after the children, describing how work "bled into homelife". Jenny, Zara and Ellie spoke about being "always on". With all the participants, there was a sense of movement between working or supporting the children, often simultaneously. Ellie spoke about "having a choice to make" when the schools were closed to juggle the working, mothering and teaching roles. Helen spoke of her resilience to keep going but a sense of having to "get on with it".

Across all four lifeworlds, participants described a perpetual sway of juggling and struggling, freedom and restrictions, structure and chaos, equality and inequality and repeated questioning of their experience and their remembered past through rose-tinted spectacles. This constant movement evokes Merleau-Ponty's (1964) sense of living as being in a never-ending dance of being-in-the-world, whether this be in one's environment or context, or in a relationship with another. Consistent with dialectical philosophy, the participants did not solve their paradoxical experience but functioned by being in a constant sway between the opposing poles of worker, mother and teacher. What was apparent in all the participants was their determination and courage to keep the sway going. A repeated term used by the participants was "juggling" hence there's a sense of swaying because the term juggling means a constant movement of throwing up and keeping the balls in the

air. In the current study, all the participants spoke of their drive to make things work for themselves and their families at whatever cost when the schools were closed. In Paradox and Passion (2015), Deurzen advocates that a passion drives us to survive the constant contradictions of life as a paradox. She argues that the constant energy of the opposing forces leads us to have passion in our living.

The discussion now focuses on how the current study and its existential phenomenological frame have expanded to, found similarities, or challenged the existing literature on working mother's lived experiences when the schools were closed. Paradoxes and the experience of being-in-sway will be discussed as the overarching themes in their lived experience by integrating the findings within and across the four lifeworlds.

Being restricted and having freedom

When the schools were closed between March and July 2020 and January to March 2021, the UK government lockdown and stay-at-home policy restricted the amount of time people could spend outside their homes (one hour a day). Between March and mid-September, no socialisation inside the home was permitted with people with whom you did not live. On September 14 2021, restrictions changed to allowing socialisation for up to six people in outside spaces of the home and public outdoor spaces (https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf). Social distancing measures were advised to stay apart from people by a minimum of two metres. Therefore, there was a restriction on the working mother's freedom. However, all spoke of their daily walk as something to be cherished, offering them and their children a sense of liberty and gratefulness of nature.

Deurzen (2015) argues that it is only possible to appreciate something when we have both the experience of it and its absence. She argues that it is only possible to learn about the importance of freedom from being oppressed. This resonates with Ellie's experience of being in nature during the school closures; she explored her local area. Ellie described nature on her doorstep that pre-pandemic, she had never

realised or visited. Being in nature allowed her to “breathe” out, have a sense of escape and see nature’s beauty “in a different way”.

Hanaway (2023) echoes Deurzen’s concept of absence, which leads to a new appreciation by citing how Sartre and Frankl highlighted that “when we are most externally restrained that we may be at our most free” (p.8). Both Hanaway and Deurzen’s concept of absence leading to appreciation is salient when we consider how the participants had never questioned their freedom to go outside whenever, wherever and with whomever they liked. During lockdown, they had lost their freedom to do this. Therefore, had a new appreciation of being outside because freedom to do so was now absent. The sense of appreciation extended beyond being outside in nature to visiting the supermarket. Jenny, Ellie, Selene, and Sasha’s described how their visits to the supermarket had a new level of importance than pre-pandemic. Going to the supermarket signified freedom from the home, me-time, a chance to socialise with friends and a lens into the pandemic and shopping trends.

Nature as nurturing

All the participants spoke about how important being outside in nature (both outside the home and in the garden) was for their wellbeing. They all prioritised their daily walk. Harkness (2019) describes how the “natural world is the context and sustenance of our life” (p. 6) and that being outdoors in nature is “restorative” (p.8). As described in the literature view, it is well-evidenced that being in natural environments benefits both psychological and physiological wellbeing (Darcy et al., 2022). During the school closures, being in nature for the participants was a way to escape the stay-at-home policy’s restrictions and nourish their wellbeing. It allowed them to be both free yet restricted as they adhered to the COVID-19 guidelines. Therefore, during the pandemic and the lockdowns, being in nature outside the home and being in their gardens had an increased significance in providing sustenance (Harkness, 2019) and being restorative and nurturing (Darcy et al., 2022). The current study therefore supports previous research into the benefit of being in nature and offers some additional insights into understanding of the importance of being

outside for Working mother's. The weather was also cited by the participants as playing a significant role in their lived experience during the school closures.

In the first school closures, the weather was described as "glorious". The garden was a significant part of the participants experience of being at home. They described the garden as being somewhere to have a drink and relax at the end of their working day and a place for their children to play. Having a garden was important in increasing their home spaces and was also place for entertainment, such as setting up an outdoor cinema, and when the six-person rule was introduced, a place to meet with family and friends. Ellie spoke of the cherished memory of how her two children set up an outdoor restaurant for her and her husband.

The current study adds to Mintz et al.'s (2021) finding that in the very restricted lockdowns of Israel, being in nature (defined as any green space) benefitted wellbeing and decreased stress. However, the findings of this study extend the Mintz et al. study who looked at a heterogeneous sample of male, females, workers and non-workers, parents or non-parents. Therefore, the current study offers a more homogeneous sample of Working mother's who were employed and had primary aged school children. The current study collected data from interviews, therefore, offers a more individual insight into the role nature had for each participant. The current study also extends the binary and positive psychology underpinnings of the Mintz et al. study. They used a first-wave positive psychology and, therefore, a binary understanding of either positive and negative affect with a focus on the positive. However, by taking an existential-phenomenological approach, the current study highlighted and expanded the understanding of Working mother's experiences by considering the binary, the non-binary, and everything in between, so both negative and positive experiences. By taking this approach, the current study supports and extends Mintz et al.'s study about the benefits of being in nature for working mothers.

Likewise, the current study adds to Mintz et al.'s study by elucidating that when the working mothers felt a sense of freedom outside, there was also a lack

of freedom due to the restrictions of having to be back at work and the one-hour window. The current study also elucidated that when the participants were 'free' in nature that they experienced jealousy and resentment towards other mothers who were either furloughed or not working. Therefore, when the working mothers were in nature, they were experiencing a double paradox of positive and negative affective states about being both free and restricted. One way to understand the participants' experience is by using the concept of a double paradox (Deurzen, 2015).

Paradox and passion: A double paradox

Deurzen (2015) argues that a new strength or opportunity emerges by facing our vulnerability of living and the inevitable paradoxes. She describes the double paradox as being at the "heart of being alive" (p. 21). By allowing ourselves to dive into the paradox, we find a depth of living and clarity we would not have experienced. In this respect, the paradox of both freedom and restrictions in nature drove an action as described by the participants to explore the green spaces in their local area, which they had previously ignored or taken for granted.

The paradoxical experience of nature during the school closures is well formulated by Deurzen's (2015) concept of paradox and passion. She argues that "letting human paradox and human passion matter again and activate our living" (2015, p. 12). In this respect, the participants found a new way to appreciate their local area and the green spaces (both urban and rural), and in their own gardens. However, there's another double paradox at play; being outside of the home posed a threat of exposure to the coronavirus.

Being in nature as a threat

Being outside their homes and in nature could have led to increased contact with other people, which could participants becoming unwell with COVID-19 and contaminating their family. In her role as a community psychiatric nurse, Kate continued to work outside the government stay-at-home policy by visiting patients' homes. She spoke about wondering how to do this whilst "maintaining a safe environment at home", and it felt "dangerous". She spoke about it being "anxiety-

inducing" of being scared about bringing the coronavirus back into her home and putting her family at risk. Being able to go outside was part of her working role, but she felt like it threatened the safety of her home space. She described an experience of psychological and physiological anxiety linked to the freedom for her to be able to go outside and visit people's homes. Kate expressed her concern that she could get stopped and questioned by the police when she was out driving and a fear that the strong smell of alcohol-based antibacterial gel could lead them to think she had been drinking alcohol.

There is a double paradox at play here for Kate. Her work involved caring for and supporting those who are unwell with psychological presentations. When the schools closed, she chose to keep her children at home rather than exercise her right as a keyworker to send them to school. She continued working to support her patients, but by doing so, she described putting her family at risk of the coronavirus. Kate was the only participant whose role involved going out of the home and into people's home's, and therefore, the double paradox of being unsafe and safe needs further exploration.

Yalom (1980) described the natural world as a "rescuer" (p. 129). However, during the pandemic, Kate, Daisy and Selene described being outside the home as also a threat. Kate spoke of her children wanting to cross the road to avoid people; Selene mentioned that the parks in the afternoon were busier and so less safe, and Daisy mentioned that they hardly saw people when they took their daily walk. Hanaway (2023) argues that living in a pandemic means that our sense of temporality and mortality shifts. She argues that the pandemic was "a constant reminder of the inevitability of death is not something we have lived with so starkly until recently" (p. 12), which means that death anxiety was experienced at a more here-and-now and conscious level. For Helen, the concept of death anxiety was experienced first-hand as her mother-in-law died due to COVID-19. Helen's husband was very ill with the virus yet refused to go to hospital due to his fear of what happened to his mother and his Asian ethnicity being associated with higher

mortality rates. Death anxiety was experienced as a conscious, real threat and a reality by Helen and the ensuing trauma and grief of her lived experience.

Helen spoke of the trauma and grief she experienced associated with death anxiety and the reality of experiencing death during the school closures. She was concerned about her own mother dying, and then during the school closures, her mother-in-law became ill with COVID-19, and her husband had to witness her life support machine being switched off. At the same time, their family pet dog had to be put to sleep. As Hanaway (2023) describes, the concept of death was ever-present during the pandemic. Helen was the only person who spoke of a direct experience of death. However, death anxiety due to fear of becoming unwell, transmitting or dying with COVID-19 was spoken of by Ellie, Daisy, Kate, Jenny, Selene and Sasha about themselves, their family and their extended family. Zara was the only person who did not speak of a fear of illness or death.

The experience of death anxiety extended to being in nature with a sense of wanting to avoid crowded places to limit the contact with other people. Selene spoke of the anxiety associated with visiting the local park and it being busy. Ellie spoke of wanting to avoid the local playgrounds. The current study supports Clark et al.'s (2021) findings that working mother's experienced grief, trauma and fear during the pandemic. However, their findings are extended by the current study as it adds more breadth to working mother's experience of these fears. The current study has met its aim of seeking to go beyond the naming themes of experience in the Clark et al. study; it has highlighted the paradoxical nature of these experiences. From a sociological perspective, the current study highlighted the paradoxical experience of being in nature as contributing to freedom and fear and the associated wellbeing and illness.

In summary, being able to have freedom also led to the experience of feeling unsafe in being in nature outside the home. From their findings, Mintz et al. hypothesised that the negative effect of being in nature was due to a feeling of being unsafe. The current study supports their hypothesis but extends it from an either-

or position of negative versus positive affect to the paradoxical position highlighted above. Deurzen (2021) argues that describing the pandemic as an existential threat increased the sense of fear and could be used by governments to wield power.

Government guidelines and school closures

Deurzen (2021) argues that the rationale for governments describing the global pandemic as an existential threat was to induce fear around COVID-19 and maintain control. Therefore, she argues that it increases the likelihood that people will adhere to the imposed restrictions and reduces criticism of the government policy of lockdowns and school closures. There was a theme of the participants being confused and resentful of government policies, particularly regarding the lack of consistency in school education provision when they were closed. They expressed their concerns about a lack of governance regarding the closure of schools, both at the government and school levels.

None of the participants challenged or criticised the government's policy of shutting the schools. However, Helen argued there should have been more clarity in what the schools should be providing. All participants highlighted the clear division between the expectations and demands between the first and second school closures. In the first lockdown, the school's demands were described as much less on the children and the parents. There was a sense of the primary schools "muddling through" and being "chaotic" in the work set and their expectations of delivery. In the second school closure, the schools were more organised which was described as increasing the demands on the Working mother's and on those with younger children, such as Zara and Daisy who had children in Reception (aged 4-5 years old). All the participants spoke of having to take on a teaching role for their children during the school closures.

Making the impossible possible: Mother, worker, teacher

All participants spoke of the impossibility of working and also teaching their children. Zara and Ellie described the constant battles of during their working day, having to support their children to sit still and focus on their schoolwork. Like Ellie's

experience, Clark et al.'s (2021) study highlighted the struggle in trying to manage worker, mother and teacher roles. They found that working mothers were responsible for managing the domestic load more, which now included teaching when the schools were closed. In the study, participants spoke about having to work whilst having the children home and the additional burden of home-schooling. However, there is a distinct difference in the perception of inequality in working mother's of the current study and other studies findings. Clark et al. concluded there was an inequality between the working mothers and their partners in managing the domestic load and home-schooling. Thomas and Pulla (2022) who conducted their research in India, highlighted a lack of support from the husbands, which they concluded was part of the Indian patriarchal culture. However, in the current study, the participants described how their husbands were supportive and worked collaboratively when the schools were closed. In the current study, only Jenny and Selene spoke about inequality between their partners in managing the domestic tasks and homeschooling the children. The difference between the current study, and Thomas and Pulla's can be understood in terms of the cultural differences of patriarchal society in India.

Equality and inequality

In the current study, all participants spoke about having a shared responsibility with their husbands for domestic tasks, homeschooling and looking after their children, However, Jenny and Selene described their resentment and frustration towards their husbands for having their assumption they had the main responsibility for communication with the schools. They were frustrated at their husband's lack of awareness of or taking action when receiving emails from the school with information about the tasks expected and delivered work. Jenny spoke about how her husband was unable to multi-task in the same way she did , answering school emails whilst in the bathroom. She also described incidences of preparing dinner whilst on work calls and taking her headset whilst on her daily walk so she could be out in nature with her children and continue working.

The other participants spoke about how they worked collaboratively with their husbands to manage the demands of working when the schools were closed. The Working mother's spoke about equality with their partner, described aptly by Sasha's use of being a "tag team" when trying to teach the children by taking turns. Sasha, Daisy, and Zara spoke about how their husbands took more responsibility for teaching the children and managing the domestic cooking load. Ellie spoke of how they split their working day with their partner so that there was also one of them being available to the children.

Inequality was part of their lived experience but rather than focused at their partner, it was directed towards the experience of the unfair and unequal expectations of their companies, jealousy of people on furlough, anger towards other working parents and envy of mothers not in paid employment or furloughed. Ellie, Zara, Daisy, Kate, and Sasha also spoke of their awareness of their own privilege compared to others during the school closures of having space in having a large enough house and a garden. Ellie described her jealousy about people being on furlough or not having to work has heard highlighted an inequality between those who were furloughed or nor having to work as hard. Zara described the inequality between herself and the bosses of her company, who had large country homes, live-in home help, and older children, whilst she had no outside support. Helen spoke of the inequality of having less resources at her company due to people being on furlough but the expectation from her company to increase her workload without any recognition or mitigation of the consequence of the demand or financial benefit. When reflecting on the inequality, the participants spoke of a sense of guilt and jealousy, particularly when comparing their experience with mothers not in paid employment or furloughed..

A feminist perspective

Although Jenny and Selene were the only participants who explicitly described an inequality between them and their husbands, there was an implicit theme of inequality in other participants with regards to the domestic, childcare and teaching

load. These unspoken themes supports a feminist perspective that even with similar salaries that working mothers are still facing an inequality at home. This supports the Forbes et al. (2020) study about the invisible, internalised inequality in working mothers. Ellie spoke about how despite trying to share the “treasured” office space, it was most often used by her husband. She would work at the kitchen table and described how if both were in meetings, that the children would always interrupt her. This suggests an inequality in whose working space was prioritised. Kate shared how her husband worked upstairs, but she worked downstairs to be near the children. This was despite her having to take distressing calls from patients. Jenny said that practically she had to work at the kitchen table because of her husband’s multiple computer screens, but also because he lacked the skills of flexibility and adaptability to be able to work and be around the children.

The participants shared that preparation was key in how they managed the roles of worker, mother and teacher. However, in sharing their experience of this planning, it seems that they shouldered most of this responsibility. This included planning the night before to have activities for the children to do during the next day, prioritizing cooking healthy meals, liaising with schools, creating snack boxes, and preparing and planning for the daily walk. It feels like this unseen domestic and childcare load fell mainly to the working mothers. Again, this seems like an implicit inequality between the participants and their partners.

A shared theme of most participant’s was about not being able to “switch off”. This suggests that although their husbands were at home, they were not able to completely delegate the responsibilities of the home and children to them. Only two participants spoke about their husbands taking more of the domestic and childcare load. However, they spoke of being “really lucky” to have a supportive partner. This is a similar finding and term of lucky found in Forbes et al.’s study. Using the term ‘lucky’ suggests that it was a privilege to have a partner who took on the role of the domestic load and childcare. This suggests an implicit inequality in their gender roles. If there was an equality, then it would have been expected that there would be

a shared load of these tasks at home.

All participants spoke about feeling guilty about not being able to be a good enough when trying to juggle the roles of mother, worker and teacher. There was an acceptance that a choice had been made to become a working mother, but an inability to be able to juggle all these roles. Ellie explicitly shared that she felt like being a mother was a hindrance to her career. Zara spoke of the resentment she felt towards those who were furloughed or did not work. Jenny shared she could only stop juggling these rules when bedridden with COVID-19. Daisy spoke of feeling unable to shift between worker and mother role, and the guilt of pressurising her children to rush their schoolwork and lunch. All spoke of the concerns that their children had been adversely affected by not being able to meet their academic, social and emotional needs.

The implicit themes of inequality in the participants experience suggests that although there has been progress in feminist movements, significant progress still needs to happen. Although none of the participants experience seems fully consistent with the 1950s housewife that the Observer cited, the current study does highlight how school closures of lockdown meant an unwavering and impossible challenge of combining the roles of worker, mother and teacher at one time. A 1950s housewife was a woman who held the responsibility of the domestic load and childcare. The working mothers in this study, either implicitly or explicitly, had the same responsibilities of the 1950s housewife but with the added roles of worker and teacher. The current study highlights that part of the progress for feminism needs to be in terms of how governments manage their socioeconomic policies, how organisations support, model and understand working mothers and attitudinal and cultural shift of the working mothers themselves. Equality means that partners should be ‘helpful’ or ‘lucky’ when sharing the domestic or childcare load.

The current study suggests that Haye’s concept of an ideological mother needs to be extended to include the term of the ideological working mother. The current study highlights the guilt in the struggling and juggling of multiple roles. Therefore,

it is suggested that working mothers could benefit from lessening the pressure on themselves to strive for the unachievable concept a work-life balance and move towards the concept of being-in-sway to evoke the sense of constant adaptation. Being-in-sway negates and challenges the unattainable 'perfect' and 'ideological' balance. I would suggest that being-in-sway is salient with the significant shift towards hybrid working. Hybrid working promotes the blending of the work and home space, and the roles of worker and mother. Therefore, the concept of being-in-sway and negation of balance is seen as relevant and much needed to support improved wellbeing for working mothers, working parents and any person trying to juggle multiple demands.

Being a good enough mother

Jealousy and guilt

The working mothers spoke of a "pang of jealousy" and guilt, highlighting the inequality in the restriction on their time with the children compared to mothers not in paid employment or furloughed. The idea of feeling guilty and not being good enough as a working mother is supported by Cummins and Branon (2022). Like Cummins and Brandon's (2021) study, Ellie felt guilty about being faced by the challenge of a working mother and that she was not free to only focus on her children. Therefore, Ellie's experience could be framed as being influenced by the concept of intensive motherhood (Williamson, 2023) and that the children's needs should be the sole focus of a mother. During online quizzes, Selene spoke of comparing her family to others and having a window into other people's lives. Zara, Jenny, and Selene spoke about feeling guilty about not being able to fulfil and meet their children's needs or becoming frustrated with their children. The concept of guilt supports the sense of being a good versus bad mother stereotypes that Elgin and Chester (2007) speak of. However, further exploration beyond the scope of the current study would need to be undertaken to understand about how working mothers during the school closures may have compared themselves to being the 'idealised mother'.

Like the Clark et al. (2021) study, the participants spoke about the negative

impact on their well-being as they attempted to juggle the roles of worker, mother and teacher. However, in the current study, the participants spoke of experiencing both negative and positive impacts on their psychological and physiological well-being when the schools were closed. In this respect, the current study expands Clark et al.'s findings by viewing the Working mother's experience through a less binary, one-dimensional lens to a more paradoxical view which offers a more nuanced and holistic view of wellbeing. The current study found that these working mothers were in a constant being-in-sway between surviving and thriving, struggling and juggling.

Surviving and thriving

Deurzen (2015) uses a metaphor of "learning to live well is really much like learning to swim well" (p. 11). She describes how the only way to learn to swim is to immerse ourselves in the water and accept that occasionally we will go under the surface. Deurzen argues that you cannot live in theory; you must live life in practice. Therefore, at some point, you must face the risks of learning to swim and jump in. By jumping in, she describes how we learn that if we resist the urge to start thrashing around and panicking, we realised that we could float. The swimming metaphor is apt for understanding the working mother's lived experience during the school closures. However, rather than jump in, it could be seen that they were pushed in and made to learn to swim by the school closures. Nevertheless, they had a choice to jump in and to learn they could survive and found ways to live. In this context, thrive means that despite the uncertainty, they found a way to survive which means they kept going rather than sinking and drowning.

Distress and delight

In the current study, as well as speaking of guilt and jealousy as described above, the participants spoke of a broad spectrum of emotions, including anger, disappointment, enjoyment, excitement, frustration, gratitude, relief, resentment, and upset. Unlike the Clark et al. (2021) study, none of the working mother's spoke about their experience through the binary lens of positive or negative impact. Changes in work practice were described as positive for some participants. Ellie, Zara, and

Daisy spoke about enjoying the imposed changes that the lockdowns made to their working lives. For Zara and Daisy, they enjoyed the challenge of having to adapt their companies' working practices and deliverables. For Ellie, there was excitement because their company had a significant growth in sales, which led to new opportunities such as advertising on TV.

The concepts of enjoyment and excitement found in current study support Hadjicharalambous et al.'s (2020) findings that protective factors for working mother's include job satisfaction. However, it also extends their study because Hadjicharalambous et al. were interested in studying causes and effects on the quality of life, health and resilience for ten days during lockdown. The current study illuminated that the participant's experience went beyond a binary cause-and-effect understanding of when the schools were closed. Therefore, the current study offers more nuanced and longitudinal findings (experiences of five months) into the working mother's experience, specifically when the schools were closed. However, the current study also expands Hadjicharalambous et al.'s findings by understanding the experiences of psychological and physiological well-being as paradoxes and illuminating the sway between them. The being-in-sway is illustrated by Jenny's feeling of failing, but also having "lovely" experiences of when the schools were closed.

The changes in Jenny's work practice led to increased stress and demands. She described how her international role became more challenging in lockdown, with an increase in demands and yet having less support. Managing a team in different counties meant she had to navigate the different lockdown rules in countries outside the UK. Jenny was the only working mother who spoke about feeling like she was failing in all aspects of her life as a mother and worker. Despite Jenny's feeling of failing, she also spoke about the "lovely experience" and how "grateful" she was when her twins made her lunch. She described her time with her children and husband as "precious" and "amazing". Other participants described the positive aspects of spending more time and feeling more connected with their partners.

Ellie spoke of having a kitchen disco while listening to DJ sets on YouTube with her husband and how it was reminiscent of their early time together. Daisy spoke of watching boxsets with her husband. Sasha spoke of laughing as she and her husband re-created movie scenes for a quiz night with friends. Kate's husband's job involved frequent travelling, so they enjoyed having more time together as a family in lockdown. Helen spoke of how she and her husband both had jobs which involved international travel. Being unable to travel during the pandemic meant she felt they had more time and became "closer". Arnold-Baker (2023) found similar themes around the benefit of being locked down for pregnant and new Working mother's. These included how having more time at home was precious and safer, as there was no commuting to work.

Like their other experiences, the overarching theme of the working mother's psychological experiences were of paradox and being-in-sway. They spoke of enjoyment but also guilt, particularly around prioritising their work over time with their children, curtailing their children's time in nature, and not having enough time to support their learning and meet their needs. Ellie, Zara, Jenny, and Selene all became visibly upset when recounting the challenge of the school closures and their struggle to work and be available for their children. Ellie spoke of being unable to work longer hours nor take any time off work to be with her children. Zara spoke about a continuous feeling of "being guilty about the kids….then you feel guilty about the other [work]". It seems the Working mother's were caught in a double paradox of guilt.

With the participants also speaking about enjoying the time with their children when the schools were closed, there is a paradoxical sense of their experience of the movement of their emotions, which Sartre (2014) aptly describes as "a wave of sensation that crashes over the self" (p. 10). Deurzen (2021) describes on YouTube that emotions as always in "ebb and flow". Sartre argues that when faced with emotions, we have a responsibility to make a choice as we experience the eruption of these feelings. Therefore, Sartre proposes that when we experience emotions,

they indicate a requirement to act. In the current study, taking Sartre's and Deurzen's explanations of the paradox of emotions could have provided the participants with the motivation for them to make the impossibility of school closures work, and take the necessary action required even if this meant being "always on". However, despite surviving the constant ebb and flow of crashing emotions, the current study found that all participants were left with concerns over the negative impact school closures had on their children.

School closures: A negative impact on their children

As highlighted in the findings, the concerns about the negative impacts of school closures fell into three broad themes: their children's well-being, academic and social skills. Zara spoke of her concern that she was unable to meet her children's needs trying to move between her work and supporting the children,

Jenny spoke of her 7-year-old daughter becoming mentally unwell, and lying on the sofa saying she did not want to live anymore. Ellie spoke of her oldest son becoming angry and stressed. Zara said one of her children used to be very laid back, but now becomes easily stressed. Kate spoke of her twin daughters experiencing social anxiety immediately after the schools re-opened (which has since abated). The school closures during COVID-19 were an unprecedented action and the impacts on school-aged children are still unknown. Rajmil et al., (2021) conducted a literature review of studies published and concluded that there was a negative impact on children across a diversity of countries, and across high- and low-income settings. These negative impacts included an increase in depressive symptoms, decrease in life satisfaction, decrease in immunity and an increase in unhealthy lifestyles. They concluded that more research needs to be undertaken by the governments who sanctioned the closures of schools as part of their attempt to manage COVID-19. Therefore, the concerns raised by participants in the current study about the negative impacts supports their findings. Therefore, this is an area that warrants further research. In May 2024, the UK government's COVID-19 inquiry began looking at the impact of their response to

the global pandemic on children and adolescents, from different socioeconomic backgrounds, those with special educational needs and disabilities. The application for participants closed in June 2024. At the time of writing, the inquiry was ongoing.

An unexpected finding of the current study was the incidence of participants who had children with SEND diagnoses (received pre or post lockdown). A child or young person as having SEND if they have a learning difficulty and/or a disability that means they require additional special health and education support (NHS England, 2024). Five of the participants had children with a diversity of diagnoses including autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia, dyscalculia and dyslexia. There was no suggestion by the participants that their diagnoses were connected to the school closures. However, those with children with SEND did mention their child's diagnosis as increasing the challenge of supporting them with their schoolwork.

Bakaniene et al., (2022) conducted a scoping review across 17 countries looking at the challenges of online learning for children with SEND. They name the need for parental support as the first challenge, as well as, change in routines, unequal access to resources, lack of accommodations and social isolation. Therefore, it could be surmised that the experiences of the four participants in this study are most likely to have been intensified by having to help teach a child with additional needs. Future studies into working mother's and school closures could focus on the experience of working mothers of children with SEND.

The wellbeing sway

The participants spoke about a distinction between the role of prioritising exercise and wellbeing between March and July 2020 and January and March 2021. The weather had a significant impact as all participants, except Helen, mentioned the good weather of the first school closures. However, in the second school closure, the weather was colder, days shorter and darker due to Winter. Going into the second school closure, the change in weather was described as

"harder" and "more stressful".

Ellie, Zoe, Kate, Selene and Sasha all spoke about eating and drinking more alcohol in the first school closure. However, in the second, they all spoke of a priority to increase their exercise, decrease the amount of alcohol consumed and improve their healthy eating. Sasha spoke of the choice in lockdowns to "become a chunk, hunk or drunk". Daisy spoke of how the benefit of not commuting meant she found the time to run in her workday. Selene spoke of playing football with her children in the park and being at her "fittest". Again, there is a sway between how prioritised physical wellbeing as moving between healthy and unhealthy in the working mother's experience.

Charalambous et al. (2019) found an increased stress on working mothers but did not explore their response to it. The current study highlights that the working mother's consciously began prioritising their physical wellbeing as the stress and demands increased in the second school closure. Like the working mother's in Hadjicharalambous et al. (2020), the current study supported how activities improved the quality of life in the participants. Daisy spoke about the benefit from having regular exercise when the schools were closed, as she found the time to fit running regularly into her workday. Again, there is a paradox about being locked down and restricted but the freedom to find time to run. There was a theme of time which again was paradoxical. The participants spoke about having more time at home, and more time with their family which were experienced positively but this had a consequence of less time for themselves as they attempted to juggle their roles of being a Working mother.

Struggling and juggling

Cooklin et al. (2014) used the concept of work-life conflict and enrichment to explore working mother's experience of combining working and mothering. The current study supported their findings that spending time with their children was a positive experience and good for their well-being. Cooklin et al. found benefits to being a working mother, which included prioritising their time with their

children. However, the current study takes a non-binary view, so it did not seek to look at conflict and enrichment as separate phenomena. Instead, participants reported conflict *and* enrichment during the school closures. Therefore, the current study challenges the concept of conflict and enrichment as a binary viewing it as simplistic either-or experience arguing that a more profound understanding of lived experience is about either-or and both-and. Therefore, they were part of the same holistic experience and were not mutually exclusive or seen as negative or positive. Therefore, the current study argues there is a constant movement between both conflict and enrichment. The working mother's experience is more holistically captured by the sway concept, which encapsulates their enrichment and conflict.

Likewise, Thomas and Pulla (2022) looked at the experience of Indian working mother using the concept of work-life balance, which, in their definition, is an absence of conflict. Their study involved utilising the concept of social and border theory to explain the benefits and consequences of compartmentalisation and blending aspects of living (such as emotions and work-life demands). Like Cooklin et al., their findings have a binary nature despite their interest in looking at the blurred boundaries of home and work life during lockdowns. The current study does not seek to negate binary concepts. However, by remaining open to the binary, non-binary, and anything in between, it was found that the Working mothers moved between compartmentalisation and blending. Again, it is argued that considering a work-life sway, and therefore being-in-sway is a more apt understanding of the lived experience of the Working mothers in the current study and how they found a way to navigate the demands of juggling and chaos.

Structure and chaos

The concept of the paradoxical work-life sway is supported by how the participants spoke about routine and structure, yet also a sense of chaos. For example, the routine of having a daily walk either at the start of the day, lunchtime or the end of the day was spoken about by all participants. However, there was also a sense of "chaos" in the struggle of moving through a working and school day. Rather

than the binary of routine and chaos, their day had become blended. Daisy illustrated this ongoing movement by describing trying to support her children to study as “chaos” and a feeling of “frustration” in not doing a “good job of home-schooling”. However, she also spoke of enjoying having a “regular exercise routine”. Overall, she spoke of how moving from compartmentalisation which she alikened to being a “robot” and an impossibility so that during the school closures, the moving towards a blending of her work and family life was fundamental “to survive”.

She describes that being a working mother, in reality, involves holding the tension and being-in-sway between compartmentalisation and blending. This challenges the binary either-or of conflict and enrichment from Cooklin et al.’s findings and the premise of balance that Thomas and Pulla proposed.

One way the participants found to navigate the struggle of managing the constant sway between their mother, teacher, and working roles was to have support from their families, particularly grandparents. The finding is like Thomas and Pulla’s (2022) study that support from families was a significant factor in improving work-life balance. Ellie, Daisy and Helen spoke of the invaluable support that their extended families gave, either to support with school or entertain their children online. Ellie spoke of setting up a split day with another working mother which enable them to each have four child-free hours. Zara described how she will have a similar plan with other Working mother’s if school closures ever happen again. Therefore, having support from others, both from family and friends, benefited the working mothers as it gave them time to be able to prioritise their work.

More we-time, less me-time

All participants reported that a benefit of school closures and working from home was that they had more time with their children and husbands. They reported how life was more “simplistic”, which allowed them to spend more time together. Words to describe being together were “precious”, “nice”, “a gift” and “as a family we got closer”. The participants spoke of enjoying crafting, growing butterflies, playing football, creating an outdoor movie theatre and building a pond in the garden. Kate

described the paradox of joy and frustration as she recounted a sense of joy in their togetherness.

Deurzen (2015) argues that we can only have the “gladness of togetherness” when we have experienced its absence. Her statement offers an explanation as to why the participants cherished this together time. Pre-school closures, they described travelling for work internationally and commuting to work. The consequence was time to see their children during the working and school week was limited. Returning to the paradoxical findings of the current study, the participants, when remembering these cherished times, also considered that maybe they were using “rose-tinted spectacles” or seeing “silver linings”. Sasha suggested maybe she had “blocked” the boring or difficult aspects of her experience and so was only remembering the good parts. This concept of blocking difficult memories could be understood in terms of Walker et al., (1997) findings about how we remember our past.

A Remembered past: Rose-tinted spectacles

In their study of autobiographical memory, Walker et al. (1997) found a difference in the longevity of retaining and recalling unpleasant and pleasant memories. The current study supports their conclusion that pleasant memories appeared to be more easily remembered, as some unpleasant memories were not as dominant in the participant’s recounting of their experience. However, the current study was focused on their lived experience as Working mother during school closures not the global pandemic per se. This may have led to less recounting of the overall memories of the global pandemic. However, it extends Walker et al.’s findings because it was open to not seeing unpleasant and pleasant memories or positive or negative emotions as binary phenomena. The current study illustrated that the participants were able to remember pleasant memories, unpleasant memories, and their associated emotions through the phenomenon of rose-tinted spectacles.

The extension to Walker et al.’s study is that, like Ellie, there was a tendency to qualify remembering pleasant memories and unpleasant memories by adding that

maybe they were seen through “rose-tinted spectacles.” The pleasant memories were linked to having more time to spend with their family, and therefore, an increased involvement in their child’s day. However, the unpleasant memories were linked to more time with their families, with the consequence of having the less time and freedom to be able to work whilst trying to combine working, mothering and teaching. Again, this highlights a further paradox in their experiences of pleasure and distress being linked to the same phenomenon of both wanting or needing less and more time.

Another extension to the Walker et al. study is that the current study found that remembering can be beneficial whether it is either unpleasant, pleasant or both. At the end of the interview, each participant was asked how they had found the experience. The interviews were conducted between September 2023 and January 2024. Yet even after between 18 and 32 months post-school closures, all participants reported that it was positive to reflect back. They appreciated the opportunity to talk about their experiences of the school closures and working from home. Helen called the interview experience “cathartic”.

The current study indicates that there could be a benefit for working mothers to have space to speak about their experience, whether it was negative, positive or anything in-between. The concept of rose-tinted spectacles in the working mother’s remembered past is consistent with Moore’s (2021) description of Kant’s concept of us always having innate spectacles. It is only through our own lens that we create meaning in our lives which is fundamental to living. Even in their remembering, the participants were in a constant sway between what they did, remembered, chose not to remember, and could not remember and whether it was a pleasant, unpleasant or pleasant and unpleasant memory. The concept of sway for the participants can be understood as being in a paradoxical state of constant flux. The overarching theme of paradox in their lived experience highlights that the Working mothers always reached and stretched themselves across the abyss, like Nietzsche’s concept of the Übermensch.

Understanding paradox: Nietzsche's Übermensch

Nietzsche's (1883) concept of the Übermensch could be used to understand the paradoxes of working mother's lived experience. The Übermensch or 'Superman' is the term used by Nietzsche to strive to be better than we are or to stretch ourselves so that we can reach out and achieve what can sometimes feel like an impossibility. For Nietzsche, the concept of the Superman is a figure which inspires humans to achieve the possibility of the impossibility for "men of the present could realise with all their spiritual and physical energies, provided they adopted the new values." (l.36). In the context of the current study, the participants had to adopt "a new way of being-in-the-COVID-19 world. Exploring their lived experience, frequently used words were "hard" and "impossible. The participants spoke about surviving, characterised by a sense of pushing themselves across the abyss of school closures and going beyond their previously perceived limits in all four lifeworlds. They all survived. The concept of survival is captured aptly by Ellie speaking about her relief of getting through the weekend week, and making it to Fridays.

Using Nietzsche's argument of the process of becoming the Übermensch, he would have argued that the working mother had to go through the "three metamorphoses of spirit" (l.483), which he called the lion, the camel and the baby. Navigating these three spirits is a metaphor for surviving through suffering in the pursuit of freedom and finding our way to create what Sartre would argue is our authentic self. Each of the participants chose to cross the abyss. Although 'Superman' is commonly used as the translation for Übermensch, it is not specifically related to a gender. So, during the school closures, the working mothers became the Übermensch. The working mothers found the existential courage to stretch themselves to the point of tension, as Zara said "How you juggle it [work and children]….it's just impossible". Nevertheless, all the working mothers in the current study carried on and found a way to make the seemingly impossible possible; they juggled and struggled, survived and thrived.

Returning to the metaphor of the abyss, if you were crossing an abyss by

throwing a rope or walking across a rope bridge, there would be no fixed state or balance in the crossing as you traversed the abyss. It would involve tolerating the perpetual sway of the rope, the rope bridge and oneself and the impact of the weather. This is like the working mother's experience which was illuminated by using the four existential lifeworlds to understand their experience holistically. Therefore, the current study suggests that for the working mothers who shared their experiences, the overarching theme for them when the school closures was paradoxical. In conclusion, one way of understanding the holistic experience of working mother's can be understood through their perpetual being-in-sway both within their lifeworlds and across the four lifeworlds.

Conclusion

The current study aimed to explore the lived experience of working mothers with primary school-aged children when the schools were closed due to COVID-19. The research question was “What was the lived experience of working mothers during the school closures of lockdown between March 2020 and March 2021?’. The methodology was reflexive thematic analysis. The four existential lifeworlds - physical, social, personal, and spiritual - were used as an interwoven frame to collect and organise the data analysis of their experiences from a holistic perspective. The existential themes and understanding of the paradoxes that were found in the data, and consistent with the study’s methodological, epistemological, and ontological underpinnings. Using reflexive thematic analysis, I acknowledge that as a researcher, my experience of paradoxes and being a working mother became intertwined with the study. To make my role visible, I have offered reflexivity throughout the study to show how I have chosen the topic and research question, collected the data, and analysed the data in the discussion and current conclusion section. I have highlighted throughout the parallel process of moving between my own roles of worker, researcher, student and mother. I have illuminated my own experience of being-in-sway whilst undertaking the current study.

The overarching theme of the working mother’s lived experience during the school closures found in the study (and illuminated by keeping my reflexive diary) was paradox and being-in-sway. In the current study, a paradox is understood from an existential perspective, arguing that human living is personified by contradictions (Deurzen, 2015). These contradictions mean we live in what Deurzen calls a “force-field of tensions between opposites” (2015, p. xv). These opposites are not to be solved but tolerated through the constant movement of either-or and learning to hold the tension of both-and. From an existential perspective, human living is about being able to withstand the experience. These contradictions “can easily swing us out of our precarious balance, bouncing us out of our comfort zone, pushing us towards the abyss” (Deurzen, 2015, p.1). The current study suggests that the working mother’s

experience during the school closures can be understood through Deurzen's concept of being bounced out of their comfort zone (working in an office, children at school) to the schools and offices closing which meant they were in a constant movement and unable to 'solve' the paradoxes of being a worker, mother and teacher.

Rather than using the words balance and movement, I suggest that a more accurate description of the working mother's experience of experiencing paradoxes is being-in-sway. This is a key descriptor and theme in all their lived experiences of the school closures. It is argued that using the concept of being-in-sway expands the existing knowledge of working mothers and specifically, their lived experience during school closures. Being-in-sway adds a more nuanced understanding than the dominant terms of work-life conflict and work-life balance. These existing terms suggest an either-or experience of working and mothering both pre-pandemic, during and post-pandemic. Likewise, using the concept of paradoxes and being-in-sway allows a shift away from the good versus bad mother and idealised mother discourse, which again suggests an either-or experience of being a mother. The current study suggests that for working mothers, the lived experience when the schools were closed was not an either-or experience but more accurately described by a both-and characterised by a being-in-sway.

Applications of the study

The study aims to apply its findings to clinical practice, organisations, and government socioeconomic policy. The findings could benefit all three areas.

Clinical practice. The working mothers spoke about the positives of speaking about their experiences as being helpful and "cathartic". Some mentioned that they had not considered their experiences since the schools re-opened. Others spoke about how, when remembering back, they wondered if they had "blocked" out the experience. The opportunity to talk about their experiences was reported as beneficial. Therefore, from a clinical application, the current study's findings could offer some insights for practitioners working with working mothers. The study highlights that the period of school closures was a challenging experience, yet it was also a time that yielded

benefits for the working mothers. The current study illustrates that practitioners must remain open to all possibilities of the working mother's experiences in the school closures, and not to just the binary of challenging and cherishing.

The current study highlights that our current understanding needs to go beyond the dominant discourse of the media about working mothers and the organisational psychology concepts of work-life balance and work-life conflict. For the participants in the current study, it is argued that taking an existential perspective to their paradoxes illuminates a being-in-sway rather than an either-or experience. Therefore, the findings in the current study encourage therapeutic practitioners to engage with a holistic approach and consider the need to hold tension of being workers, mothers and teachers during the school closures. Some indications of being-in-sway could also help understand the experience of being a working mother at any time.

Organisations. The current study's findings offer a glimpse into the challenges of being a working mother when the schools were closed. These findings are important for organisations if the schools close again, such as if working mothers needs to combine being at home with their child and working for other reasons, such as during the school holidays or if the child is sick. With companies' ongoing commitment to hybrid work, the findings can also offer some insights into the challenges and benefits. Overall, the findings offer some understanding of possibilities for how organisations can support Working mothers.

The findings highlighted that it is valuable for working mothers to have visibility in their dual role as workers and mothers. Visibility helped them be more authentic in their work and mothering role, which was experienced as beneficial. As one working mother eloquently stated, we are neither robots nor light switches which can be easily turned on or off. Authenticity in the workplace could lead to working mothers being able to, as Spinelli (2005) argues, help them more fully tolerate their possibilities and limitations and maximum their potential for living. One participant reported that role-modelling authenticity by being visible was beneficial

to their workplace culture. Being more authentic as a working mother could also lead to better role-modelling for other women. There are a disproportionate number of working mothers who leave work or decline promotions due to motherhood as a result of "outdated prejudices and assumptions" (Fawcett Society, 2023). In 2016, it was estimated that the cost to UK employers for women leaving their jobs due to issues relating to motherhood was £278.8 million per annum (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016). Therefore, supporting working mothers in senior positions to model authenticity could benefit other working mothers by supporting a more inclusive culture in organisations and lead to significant cost savings.

Another learning from the findings is that five of the eight participants felt like their companies listened to their challenges but did not implement any practical support. Since the lockdown, companies have been implementing policies for hybrid working. The findings suggest a specific collaboration with working mothers to understand better about what support and guidelines could be beneficial. Guidance could include working remotely at home without children, but also on the occasions when the children are also at home, either in the holidays or due to illness during a school day. The working mothers had several suggestions for how workplaces and schools could be more supportive. This approach respects and values the working mother's lived experience. It also recognises that navigating the school closures and any challenges of being a working mother is not just their own individual responsibility but a collective responsibility for organisations and government socioeconomic policy.

Government socioeconomic policy. As outlined in the introduction, the SAGE committee did not consider the gender impact of lockdowns and school closures. The current study's findings highlight that socioeconomic policy needs to consider gender implications and working mothers. None of the participants directly criticised the policy of lockdown and closing the schools. However, the working mothers spoke of the need for more guidance from the government about how schools were to teach and support the children. Therefore, a key learning from the study is that as

part of any pandemic planning, which includes closing schools, there needs to be a well-thought-out plan for how schools will continue to support children when they are learning remotely. These could include guidelines about expectations regarding the curriculum being taught to create a unified direction for senior school leaders and teachers. Likewise, this will help the schools to be able to provide coherent and consistent guidelines for what is expected of the children and to provide support for parents in helping them. The current study found that this is particularly prudent in primary-age children who are less likely to be independent learners and, therefore, require support from their parents. In addition to the learnings from the current study, I acknowledge that it has limitations and could also contribute to future research.

Limitations and future research

The current study was a small-scale, qualitative study which interviewed eight working mothers aged between 45-55 years old about their lived experience when the schools were closed during the pandemic. Although the research was advertised widely, there was a skew in the sample who came forward to participant, towards high earning, older mothers in senior roles compared to the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria which included working mothers who were 25-55 years old and had no salary or role specification so this could be seen as a limitation of the current study. Interviewing younger mothers or those on lower salaries or less senior roles may yield different and new findings. The participants all lived in London or within 75 miles of the capital. Therefore, the sample was from a particular geographic area in the South-East of England. Hadjicharalambous et al. (2020) found that psychological resilience was more impacted for women living in rural areas. Therefore, future research could include other areas of the UK, including both cities and surrounding areas, or consider if there are any differences for working mothers between city and rural experiences during school closures.

Likewise, understanding the lived experience of working and parenting during lockdown could be extended to single mothers and working fathers. This supports Iztayeva (2021) argument that single parents require more recognition for their

experiences during school closures/ As mentioned in the Introduction, Working mothers who experienced IPV were excluded and given the increase in this type of abuse, a future study would be beneficial to understand more about Working mothers and the school closures.

Five of the eight participants had children who were either diagnosed pre-pandemic, during or post-pandemic with SEND. These included ASD, ADHD, dyspraxia, dyslexia and dyscalculia. Given that this represents more than 50% of the self-selected sample, future studies could focus their research on the specific lived experience of Working mothers with children with SEND presentations when the schools were closed.

The current study suggests that being-in-sway was the main theme of the participants' lived experience. However, further research could help us understand more about the experience of meaning-making during the school closures. Likewise, future research using a grounded theory method could explore and support the appropriateness of being-in-sway as an appropriate term for Working mother's lived experience. Consistent with my commitment to pluralism, as a counselling psychologist-in-training with an existential attitude, the current study is limited because it only offers one way to explore the Working mother's lived experience and answer the research question. Future research will find different ways to answer the same, similar, or different research questions to explore the lived experience of Working mothers when the schools were closed.

Six of the eight participants spoke about being either an equivalent earner to their husbands or earning more. Having similar or higher salaries led to a particular experience for the working mother, which might differ if the woman's income were lower. Lyonette and Crompton (2015) found that even when women earned more or worked more hours than their male partner, they still spent more time on domestic tasks. Their conclusion was that although women were 'undoing' gender norms in terms of their incomes, they were 'doing' gender norms in their domestic load responsibility. This alludes to a paradox but is not specifically explored. Further

research could explore the lived experience of working mothers during the school closures with lower or higher income levels and this concept of ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ gender norms as understood using a feminist lens.

Feminist learnings

Cano (2022) argues that the impact of COVID-19 pandemic has had both positive and negative impacts on the feminist movement. She acknowledges that the impact is multifaceted and complex. Özkazanc-Pann and Pullen (2020) argue that the global pandemic has widened inequalities in race, class and gender, and had a negative impact on intersectional feminism as most significant. However, Tabbush and Friedman (2020) posit that COVID-19 has led to a new wave of feminism activism. They cite how the previous significant viral outbreaks of Ebola between 2014-2016) and Zika between 2015-2016, there was an absence of consideration of gender implications in the illness and socioeconomic policy. Likewise, the 1918 Influenza outbreak called ‘Spanish Flu’ (considered the most like the recent COVID-19 global pandemic) did not consider the gender impacts.

Therefore, a significant difference with these previous outbreaks and COVID-19 is the significant debates between 2019 (and ongoing) around the considerations of gender, particularly women, across the world in media coverage, the number of calls to action and considering the impact of responses of gender. As cited, the knowledge around gender impacts continues to grow. Tabbush and Friedman cite a positive step in the United Nation’s (UN) focus and reports on gender implications of the pandemic. They argue how it was the presence of feminist social scientists at the UN who developed the UN Women and UN Development programme (Staab et al., 2020) to track gender responses in 206 countries. Since the last significant outbreaks, as cited in the introduction, in the UK, the gender pay gap has reduced and more women are returning to paid work.

However, the current study highlights that despite the progress cited above, that despite similar earnings and shared responsibilities there was still an implicit and explicit inequality experienced by the participants. This is linked to the implicit mental

load the participants described in planning and managing the childcare and teaching roles, the inequality in having a dedicated workspace and the descriptions of their husbands being “helpful” and feeling “lucky” that they were supportive.

Therefore, similar to the Forbes et al, (2020) findings, the current study demonstrates there is more work for working mothers to achieve equality, which goes beyond striving towards equal earnings and career achievement. I would suggest the required progress goes beyond the pandemic and requires a social and cultural shift in society. The development of online communication is cited as being a significant factor in the progress of feminism in COVID-19 (Cano, 2022). I would suggest this is because it allowed feminists across the globe to communicate, share and collaborate in their knowledge. Likewise, I feel that there is a role for working mothers, of which myself is included, to communicate, share and collaborate our knowledge and experience about being working mothers. By doing this, we can meet part of what it means to be a feminist, which is to take action. As a suggestion, working mothers could create support groups placing and challenging equality at epicentre. As part of this, they reflect on how in their own roles they are contributing and perpetuating the socially constructed inequality of working mothers, to challenge language and terms like ‘balance’ and the ideological working mother; and to use this to take collective action at the both the implicit and explicit, individual and organisational and at education and government policy. The aim of the current research was to hear the working mothers voice, and part of the call to action from the findings is to participate and encourage working mothers to have their voice heard. I aim to answer my responsibility to this call to action by disseminating the findings of the study to working mothers via social media channels of LinkedIn, organisations via press releases to relevant publications, with academics via journal and to the government by sharing the findings with ministers involved in education, work and equality.

Final reflections: Being-in-sway

The parallel process between myself and this study of being-in-sway began

early on, even before I had recruited or interviewed the participants. As I began developing the interview schedule, tension emerged regarding my aim to be open to the data collection, yet the draft questions appeared to be too closed. I felt uncomfortable that I was struggling to be my authentic self when trying to prepare for a 'good', structured interview schedule. Sharing my reflections with the Research module lead, Nancy highlighted that maybe I was experiencing a conflict similar to the two roles of mothering and working. On reflection, I was losing myself. By reflecting further, I could see that by writing actual questions, I was going too far into the part of my brain that likes structure and security and moving away from my creative and more maverick brain. Through conducting this study and keeping a reflexive diary, I have learnt that research requires the ability to move between both creativity and structure and to hold the tension of these paradoxes. Research includes both creativity and rigour and an experience of chaos and structure.

Personal therapy helped me understand that my brain works optimally when holding a loose frame that allows space to be both creative and maverick. Reflecting on this approach with my supervisor, Jo, helped me understand that I needed a frame to organise how I collect and analyse the data. Taking this approach allowed the space to hear the working mother experiences in their own words by utilising the four lifeworlds as a loose, interconnected frame. Once I had reflected on this, I was able to write an interview schedule which started with an open question to invite the participants to tell me what they remembered about their experience when the schools closed, but using a table of the four worlds as a crib sheet (see Appendix 4). The interview scheduled enabled me to hold to the studies aim of exploring their lived experience holistically. Taking this approach and trusting in my counselling skills of active listening skills, reflection and working at the participants pace helped me as a researcher be open to their experiences.

Holding onto the tension of moving between structure and chaos during the research reminded me of the first assignment I wrote when starting the DCPsych in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy at NSPC. The essay was a reflective,

practical, and theoretical look at becoming a counselling psychologist. It was written in January 2021, when the schools were still closed. I found the following excerpt about how “I see myself being something of the “maverick” that CoP attracts (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2009, p. 19). As I complete this write-up, personal therapy has helped me understand about how much undertaking this research has impacted my self-development and identity, both personally and professionally. I can see how the concept of being-in-sway has relevance to who I am and my lived experience as working mother, researcher and therapist. My research into working mothers has shown how being a maverick manifests in my professional and personal identity with my creative way of thinking and being. I can be comfortable sitting in chaos and uncertainty, yet sometimes find too much rigid structure a challenge and restrictive. Three years later, as I am finishing my doctoral training, I would like to extend my early thoughts as a trainee and my identity as a counselling psychologist. I currently see myself as methodical maverick who has found a way to hold the tension of structure and chaos by being-in-sway. This allows me to be adaptable and be open to being-in-the-world as an ever-changing, living person. I recognise that human living and experience is never a fixed state. Like the participants in this study, I am committed to being open to a perpetual process of being-in-sway.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Distress protocol

The Department of Health and Social Sciences
Middlesex University, Hendon, London NW4 4BT

Distress Protocol

[*Insert date***]**

Title of study: **An exploration into the experience of working mothers during the school closures of COVID-19**
Researcher: Lizzy Bazalgette, workingmothersresearch@gmail.com
Supervisor: Dr Claire Arnold-Baker, claire@nspc.org.uk
Academic year: 2021/2022

A distress protocol will be implemented if participants become distressed during the initial phone call, during the interview and the debrief. The has been adapted using Chris Cocking's (London Metropolitan University, 2008) distress protocol and involves a three –stepped protocol listing distress signs to look out for, and action to be taken will be used if participants start to appear distressed or agitated at any point during the study. Any distress will be reported to the Dr Claire Arnold-Baker to ensure that appropriate action has been taken.

Mild distress
Signs to look out for:
1) Change in tone of voice (chocked or emotional) or find it difficult to talk
2) Appear tearful
3) Participant becomes distracted/ restless
Action to take:
1) Check if the participant wants to stop the phone call or interview
2) Offer the participant a break
3) Remind the participant they can stop the interview at any time if it becomes too distressing.

Severe distress
Signs to look out for:
1) Participants feel, say or the researcher perceives that they are incapable of talking coherently (uncontrollably crying, hyperventilating or experiencing other intense emotions)
2) Anxiety related physical symptoms such as uncontrollable shaking, heart palpitations, difficulty breathing
3) Flashbacks or memories that appear traumatic
Action to take:
1) The researcher will stop the phone call or interview
2) A debrief will happen straightaway
3) Suggest breathing techniques

4) The researcher will be empathetic towards the participant, acknowledging their distress and reassuring them that finding this topic distressing is normal.
5) Provide details of services that can help and suggest participants discuss this further with a mental health professional

Extreme distress

Signs to look out for:

1) Participant appears extremely agitated either verbally or physically
2) Severely hostile towards the researcher (physically or verbally)

Action to take:

1) Make sure the participant and researcher are safe
2) The researcher to inform the Early Intervention Team or Emergency services directly if concerned for their safety.
3) If the researcher feels the participant is in immediate risk, they will suggest the participant goes to A&E

Appendix 2: Participant information sheet

The Department of Health and Social Sciences
Middlesex University, Hendon, London NW4 4BT

Participant Information Sheet

Title of study: **An exploration into the experience of working mothers during the school closures of COVID-19**

Researcher: Lizzy Bazalgette, workingmothersresearch@gmail.com
Supervisor: Dr Claire Arnold-Baker, claire@nspc.org.uk
Academic year: 2023/2024

Introduction
My name is Lizzy Bazalgette; I am a doctoral trainee in counselling psychology and psychotherapy at NSPC, London (a partner of Middlesex University). I am funding and conducting research into the experience of working mothers during the school closures of lockdown. Since 2020, there have been many news headlines about working mothers and school closures.

What is the purpose of the research? Hearing directly from working mothers themselves offers the opportunity to understand more about the effect school closures had on working mothers. Any insights could be helpful when similar social policies are considered for companies as they move towards hybrid working and for working mothers themselves. Dr Claire Arnold-Baker supervises the research from NSPC, London.

Why have I been chosen? I will be interviewing working mothers aged 25-50 years old who, during the school closures, were working at home 4+ days a week, had children between the ages of 4-11 years old living permanently at home with them and a live-in partner. A working mother also includes being either a carer or guardian. If you fit these criteria, I invite you to participate in my research. Regrettably, the study will be unable to include working mothers who were subject to violence from their partners during the school closures. Violence from partners is an experience that warrants specific research, and the limited scope of this study would be unable to give it the attention required. If you are a victim of partner violence and would like support, please visit https://www.womensaid.org.uk/womens-aid-directory/ for listings of local support services.

Do I have to take part? Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you would be able to withdraw from the research without giving reasons before and during the interview. You can withdraw all or part of your interview material from the study for up to one month after the interview has taken place by emailing me at workingmothersrsearch@gmail.com. Unfortunately, after this time, the data analysis may have started, which will mean that it will be impossible to remove your participation.

What will happen to me if I take part? Participation would involve a single confidential

interview conducted by myself. The interview would last between one and one and a half hours and take place at a time (including meeting online) that suits you. The interview would, with your consent, be recorded and transcribed by me. We can meet at face-to-face at a location to suit, such as a private room in a local library to you or at Middlesex University, London. COVID-19 guidelines will be in place for any face-to-face interview. Alternatively, we could meet online using a secure remote service such as Zoom. Travel expenses will be offered up to £25.00 on the provision of a receipt. The actual interview will be around one hour, with some time for introductions at the start and a Debrief at the end. During the Debrief, there will be time to ask any questions. I will re-clarify the aims of the research and the terms of withdrawal and ask whether you would like a copy of the thesis once completed. If you would like a copy of your transcript or audio recording, please request this within two weeks of your interview date. If you want to see a copy of this thesis, this will only be possible after it has been accepted for doctoral approval as it may be subject to multiple iterations. Any comments on the final thesis would be appreciated.

What are the possible disadvantages to taking part? The interviews will cover a range of topics related to your being a working mother and your experience during the school closures of lockdowns. As this will be an in-depth discussion on a personal topic, although no risks have been identified in taking part, there is a chance you might find it upsetting. I will remain aware throughout your participation of any unanticipated risks, such as talking about sensitive topics during the interview. We can pause at any time during the interview. I will have procedures to manage this if you experience even mild distress.

What are the possible advantages to taking part? Whilst there is no direct advantage of taking part, I hope you will find participating in the study and discussing your experience as a working mother during school closures both enjoyable and interesting. Some participants find talking about their experiences to be therapeutic and it may benefit you to know that you are adding to the literature on this topic which may help support other mothers in understanding their experiences during lockdown.

Consent. If you decide to participate, I will send you a Written Informed Consent form which I will go through with you before the interview to make sure you have fully understood the aims and objectives of the research and the risks and benefits of taking part. Once we have gone through the Consent form I will ask you to sign it.

Who is organising and funding the research? This research forms part of a doctoral thesis and is fully funded by me, the researcher.

What will happen to the data? Your data will be transcribed by me at which time all identifying features will be removed or changed. Your audio recording will then be destroyed. All personal data will be saved using a coding system to ensure that your name will not appear anywhere with your data. Your data will be stored for up to 10 years on a password protected and encrypted personal laptop in my own home, ensuring your data will remain secure. Your consent form will be stored, if hard copy, in a locked, stored filing cabinet. No third parties will have access to your data. Verbatim quotes taken from your transcript will be used in the published doctoral thesis and may be used for dissemination purposes via academic conferences, journal articles and book chapters.

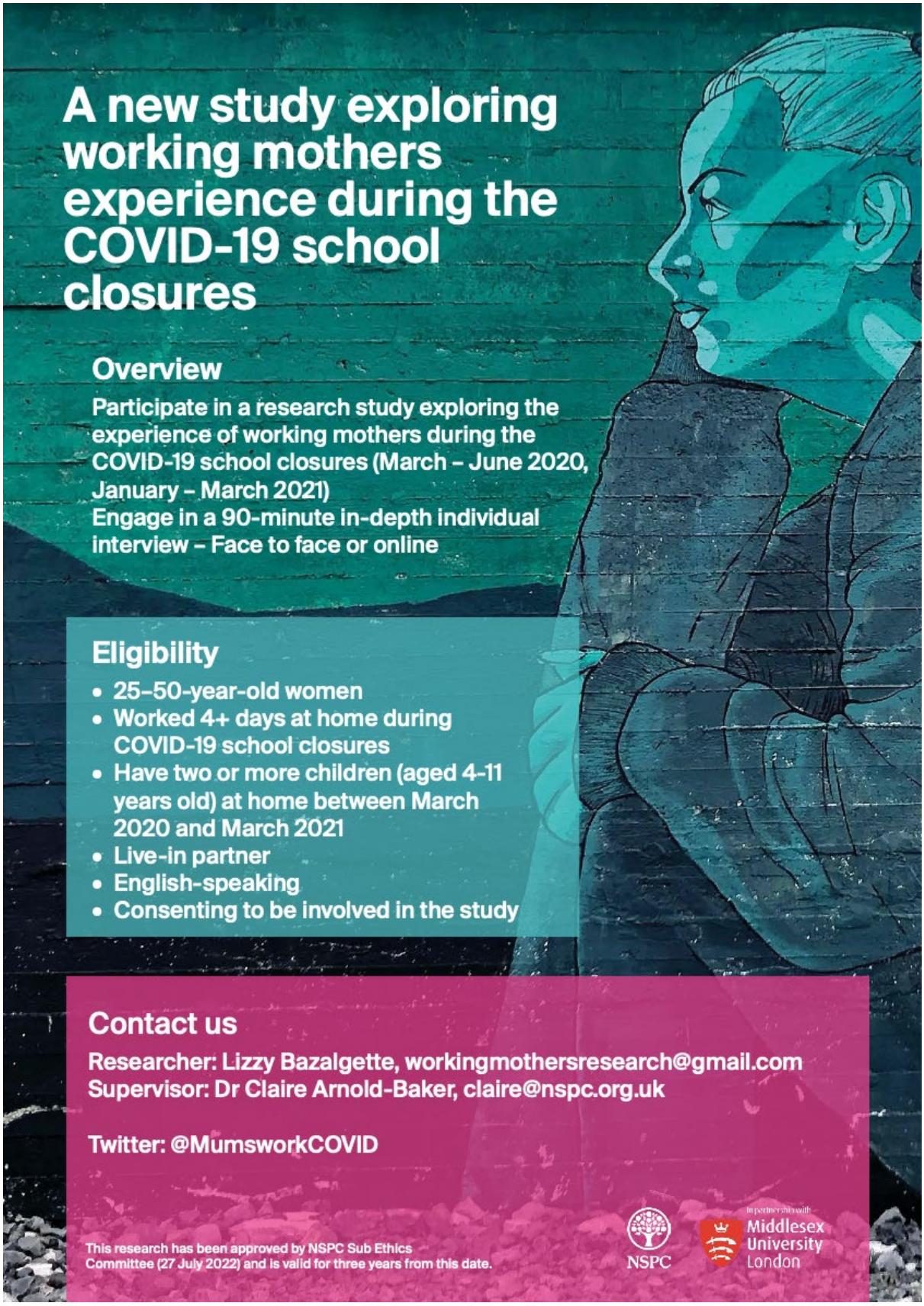
Who has reviewed the study? An Ethics Committee reviews all proposals for research using human participants before they can proceed. The NSPC Ethics Sub-Committee has reviewed and approved this study.

Concluding section. If you have any specific questions or need clarification, we can discuss

these in our phone call or at the start of the interview; please do not hesitate to call or email me. I will be in touch in one week's time to when you can let me know if you would like to participate and check that you meet the criteria.

Thank you very much for your time and help in considering taking part.

Appendix 3: Recruitment poster



Appendix 4: Interview crib sheet

Interview sheet – PRESS RECORD ON PHONE AND SCREEN

Name (initials):	
Age:	
Children and ages (now):	
Number of days working:	
Job title / Industry:	
Date of interview:	

Questions:

So, thinking back to the school closures (Mar-June 2020; Jan-Mar 2021) and you were a working mother at home, what can you tell me about your experience during this time?

Were there any differences between the first and second time the schools were closed?

Prompts: "Tell me more", "that sounds interesting", "go on" etc.

More structured prompts:

Thinking back, what was your physical experience of being a working mother at home during the school closures? E.g what was your physical health like? sleeping? eating? Energy? What did your body feel like?

What was it like for you personally being a working mother at home during the school closures? E.g. how did you feel, what thoughts did you have, any conflicts, changes in role etc?

What were your relationships like with other people (partner, children, family, friends, colleagues) being a working mother at home during the school closures? E.g. loss of freedom whilst all being at home and social isolation, online contact, limited face to face contact etc

What if any changes did you experience about you felt about your life and role during the school closures?

E.g., did you experience any changes in what it meant to be a working mother, or how you valued your role as a working mother?

Physical world (Sensations, actions, environment, body, survival/world)		**Personal world** (Thoughts, feelings, loss of freedom, identity, selfhood/me)	
	SC1 v SC2		SC1 v SC2

Social world (Relationships with partner, children, friends, family, work colleagues, belonging, communication)		**Spiritual world** (Intuitions, values, beliefs, meaning/ideas)	
	SC1 v SC2		SC1 v SC2

Closing interview:

- Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experience of being a working mother during school closures?
- Do you have any questions about the research?

Debriefing:

Thank you for taking part in my research study. Now that the interview has finished, I thought it might be helpful to spend the final few minutes talking about how you found the experience, re-confirm the aims of the research and outline what the next steps will be.

I hope that you found our discussion interesting and enjoyable?

As you know I am interested in exploring how working mothers like yourself experienced school closures during lockdowns. Any insights of your experience could be helpful when similar social policies are considered for companies as they move towards hybrid working and for working mothers themselves. On a personal note, your generosity in taking part will help me complete my doctoral research as part of qualifying as a Counselling psychologist, and I am very grateful to you for that.

Would you like a copy of your recording and/or the transcript? Upon request, when the study is completed, I can send you a copy of the study so you can see the insights that you have contributed to.

To confirm, your anonymity and confidentiality will be protected throughout the study and when I write-up the findings. To clarify, the interview from today will be transcribed by me at which time all identifying features will be removed or changed. Your audio recording will then be destroyed. All personal data will be saved separately, and a coding system will be used to ensure that your name will not appear anywhere with your data. Your data will be stored for up to 10 years on a password protected and encrypted personal laptop in my own home, ensuring your data will remain secure. Your consent form will be stored, if hard copy, in a locked, stored filing cabinet at my home which only I have will have access to. No third parties will have access to your data, either hard copy or digital. Verbatim quotes taken from your transcript may be used in the published doctoral thesis and may be used for dissemination purposes via academic conferences, journal articles and book chapters. Any direct quotes used in the final thesis, publications or presentations will not be attributable to yourself nor company.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you would be able to withdraw all or part of your interview from the research without giving reasons between now and one month after our interview today. To withdraw, please email me at workingmothersrsearch@gmail.com. Unfortunately, after one month, the data analysis may have started, which will mean that it will be impossible to remove your participation.

After talking about your experiences, if anything from our interview today makes you feel you could benefit from talking about them further about them and having some therapeutic support, I recommend going to the British Psychological Society (bps.org.uk) or BACP (bacp.co.uk) websites to look for an accredited psychologist, counsellor or psychotherapist in your local area.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any further questions, comments or concerns after this interview has finished, or you would be interested in receiving a copy of the final thesis. If you do not feel comfortable contacting me directly, please contact my research supervisor, Dr Claire Arnold-Baker, claire@nspc.org.uk

Many thanks once again for taking part in my study.

Appendix 5: Debriefing protocol

The Department of Health and Social Sciences
Middlesex University, Hendon, London NW4 4BT

Debriefing Protocol

[*Insert date***]**

Title of study:	**An exploration into the experience of working mothers during the school closures of COVID-19**
Researcher:	Lizzy Bazalgette, workingmothersresearch@gmail.com
Supervisor:	Dr Claire Arnold-Baker, claire@nspc.org.uk
Academic year:	2021/2022

Thank you. Thank you for taking part in my research study. I hope that you found our discussion interesting and enjoyable. Now that the interview has finished, I thought it might be helpful to spend the final 15 minutes talking about how you found the experience, re-confirm the aims of the research and outline what the next steps will be.

As you know I am interested in exploring how working mothers like yourself experienced school closures during lockdowns. Any insights of your experience could be helpful when similar social policies are considered for companies as they move towards hybrid working and for working mothers themselves. On a personal note, your generosity in taking part will help me complete my doctoral research as part of qualifying as a Counselling psychologist, and I am very grateful to you for that.

The findings. Would you like a copy of your recording and/or the transcript? Upon request, when the study is completed, I can send you a copy of the study so you can see the insights that you have contributed to.

Protecting your contribution. To confirm, your anonymity and confidentiality will be protected throughout the study and when I write-up the findings. To clarify, the interview from today will be transcribed by me at which time all identifying features will be removed or changed. Your audio recording will then be destroyed. All personal data will be saved separately and a coding system will be used to ensure that your name will not appear anywhere with your data. Your data will be stored for up to 10 years on a password protected and encrypted personal laptop in my own home, ensuring your data will remain secure. Your consent form will be stored, if hard copy, in a locked, stored filing cabinet at my home which only I have will have access to. No third parties will have access to your data, either hard copy or digital. Verbatim quotes taken from your transcript may be used in the published doctoral thesis and may be used for dissemination purposes via academic conferences, journal articles and book chapters. Any direct quotes used in the final thesis, publications or presentations will not be attributable to yourself nor company.

Right to withdraw. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you would be able to withdraw all or part of your interview from the research without giving reasons between now and one month after our interview today. To withdraw, please email me at workingmothersrsearch@gmail.com. Unfortunately, after one month, the data analysis may have started, which will mean that it will be impossible to remove your participation.

Further support. After talking about your experiences, if anything from our interview today makes you feel you could benefit from talking about them further about them and having some therapeutic support, I recommend going to the British Psychological Society (bps.org.uk) or BACP (bacp.co.uk) websites to look for an accredited psychologist, counsellor or psychotherapist in your local area.

There are also specific websites which look to offer support better mental health at work:

https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/

https://workingfamilies.org.uk/

https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/

Please feel free to contact me if you have any further questions, comments or concerns after this interview has finished, or you would be interested in receiving a copy of the final thesis. If you do not feel comfortable contacting me directly, please contact my research supervisor, Dr Claire Arnold-Baker, claire@nspc.org.uk

Many thanks once again for taking part in my study,

Appendix 6: Lincoln and Guba's six phase approach

Phases of thematic analysis	Means of establishing trustworthiness
Phase 1: Familiarising self with the data	• Prolonged engagement with data • Triangulation of different data collection modes • Documentation of theoretical and reflective thoughts • Document thoughts about potential codes/themes • Store raw data in organised archives • Keep records of all data field notes, transcripts and reflexive journals
Phase 2: Generating initial notes	• Peer debriefing • Researcher triangulation • Reflexive journaling • Adopting a coding framework • Keep an audit trail of code generation • Documentation of any supervisory meetings and peer debriefings
Phase 3: Searching for themes	• Researcher triangulation (with supervisory team) • Diagraming to make sense of connections • Keep detailed notes about development and hierarchies of concepts and themes
Phase 4: Reviewing themes	• Researcher triangulation (with supervisory team) • Themes and subthemes discussed with supervisory team • Test for referential adequacy through returning to raw data

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes	• Researcher triangulation (with supervisory team) • Peer debriefing • Documentation of supervisory meetings regarding themes • Documenting theme naming
Phase 6: Writing up the study	• Member checking • Peer debriefing • Describing process of coding and analysis in detail • Thick descriptions of content • Description of the audit trail • Report on rationale for theoretical, methodological, and analysis throughout the study

Appendix 7: Codebook

Overarching theme of lived experience is Paradox –

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
Personal world: Emotions		"a complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioural and physiological elements." Emotions are how individuals deal with matters or situations they find personally significant (APA, 2019)		P1, P2, P3
Subthemes				
	Guilt	a self-conscious emotion characterized by a painful appraisal of having done (or thought) something that is wrong and often by a readiness to take action designed to undo or mitigate this wrong. (APA)	Inductive, semantic	P1, P2, P6
	Frustration	the emotional state an individual experiences when thwarting (preventing achieving something they want to have or do) occurs. (APA)	Inductive, semantic	P1, P2,P3, P8
		Not being the real hero		P4

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
	Jealousy	a negative emotion in which an individual resents a third party for appearing to take away (or being likely to take away) someone or something they want (https://dictionary.apa.org/jealousy)	Inductive, semantic	P1, P2
	Upset or Finding things difficult,not enjoyable	to be disturbed, agitated or unhappy	Inductive, latent	P1, P2, P3, P6
	Excitement	an emotional state marked by enthusiasm, eagerness or anticipation, and general arousal. (APA)	Inductive, latent	P1, P2, P3
	Fear	a basic, intense emotion aroused by the detection of imminent threat, involving an immediate alarm reaction that mobilizes the organism by triggering a set of physiological changes. (APA)	Inductive, latent, semantic	P1, P3, P4, P6, P7
(new)	Anxiety			P4
(new)	Worry			P5, P8
(new)	Scared			P4, P5

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
(new)	Making jokes			P5
(new)	Stress			P2, P3,P6, P8
(new)	Positive			P3
(new)	Enjoyment			P3
(new)	Relief			P3, P5, P6
(new)	Anticipation			P1, P3
(new)	Grateful			P3, P4, P8
(new)	Trauma			P4, P7
new	Resentment			P2, P3, P4, P7
new	Loneliness			P5, P6
new	Surreality			P4, P6
new	Anger	Towards schools/government		P4, P7
new	Compassionate			P7
new	Boredom			P7
new	Resilience	(P7 named it -but others all survived)		P7, P8
new	Grief			P7
new	Rose-tinted spectacles – not stressful			P2, P8

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
Social world; Relationships		a continuing and often committed association between two or more people, as in a family, friendship, marriage, partnership, or other interpersonal link in which the participants have some degree of influence on each other's thoughts, feelings, and actions. *(APA)*	Inductive, semantic	P1
Subthemes				
With family	Rose-tinted glasses (around the 'freedom' to be a mother, spend quality time)	Seeing things in a positive light, often better than it is or was Lovely memories Simplicity More time Closer		P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8
	Conflict			P8

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
With children	Quality time with children	Spending time with the children		P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6,, P7, P8
		‘That Friday feeling’		
	Entertainment			P3
	Battles	Inductive, semantic, latent	Inductive, Semantic	P1, P3, P5
	Impact on children -	Observations and experience of any impact on the children – subthemes -academic, socially, mental health, seeing/hearing arguments		P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
	Being online	Social time		P8
	SEND			
		Paradox		P7
	Supporting	Finding ways to cope		P2, P3, P4
	Making food			P1, P5
(new)	More time with children, less with family (Paradox)			P5

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
(new)	Managing social time with peers – birthday parties, meet-ups, sleep overs			P4, P6, P8
	SEND			P5, P6,P7?,. P8
With partner	Support, togetherness, collaboration	Spending time with partner, working as a team, positive closeness		P1, P2, P3, P4, P7, P8
	Partner – tag team			
(new)	Partner - struggling			P3, P5, P6, P7
New	Loss	Loss of intimacy		P5
	unfairness, tension,	Feeling like their work was prioritised, children asking Working mother; planning activities		P1, P2, P5, P6
	Negative impact on relationship	Arguing, loss of intimacy, resentment		P5, P6,
	Non-traditional roles			P2,P3,P8
With extended family	Extended family	Keeping in contact		P3, P6, P7, P8
	Parents	Conflict		P6

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (de-ductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Para-dox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/De-ductive (pre-con-ceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Para-dox		**A tension and contradic-tion that can never be re-solved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
	Parents	Support (teaching)		P1, P7
	Parents	Threat of death/ Death		P1, P7
(new)	Extend-ed family (parents, parents-in-law)	Deterioration / loss		P2, P6
Inequality	Unfairness	Feeling that it wasn't 'fair' being a Working mother – partner, friends, others (furlough), non-Working mother, parents		P1, P2, P5
With others (work col-leagues)	Unfairness	Not seeing how much work they were doing o manage		P1, P2, P5
new	Resent-ment	Taking on more responsibil-ity/risk		P4, P5
	Support	Verbally supportive, but not action	Inductive, semantic	P1, P2, P5
	Altered perception – visible v invisible	Wanting to be seen, but not seen, being a role model	Inductive, Latent	P1, P2, P3
		Social time		P6
new	Gaining-support			P3
new	Losing - support			P4
new	Offering support			P2,P4

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
new	Being a role model			P3
With others (furlough)	Resentment	. a feeling of bitterness, animosity, or hostility elicited by something or someone perceived as insulting or injurious. (APA)	Inductive, semantic	P1, P2
With others (Working mother-mum)	Solidarity/ Support?	Share a problem come together to provide help, comfort, and guidance, help others	Inductive, semantic	P1, P2, P7
With others (mums)		Meeting outside for socials		P4
Wither other Ps	Anger/Furious	Other P sending kids into school		P2
With others (non-Working mother)	Jealousy	See above	Inductive, semantic	P1
With others	Social time	Strangers		P6
	Helping			P2, P6, P7
Others (?)	Inequality	Being a Working motherT		P2
With friends	Entertainment			P1,P2, P3,P4, P6, P7, P8

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
	Making the invisible visible			P6
	Support			P1, P6
				P4
Others – in power (government)	Criticism/ confusing – not feeling supported	Gov Guidelines		P4, P7
Others in power (schools)		Disappointed, inequality, disorganised		P6, P5, P7, P8
Others in power (teachers)				P6, P7
Personal or spiritual: Roles		a coherent set of behaviors expected of an individual in a specific position within a group or social setting. (APA)		P1
Subthemes				P1
	Juggling	Working hard to prioritise between roles as Working mother, Mother (M) and Teacher (T)	Inductive, semantic/ latent	P1,P2, P4, P5,P6
		Always on		P5, P6?, P7

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
		Examples: Interview in car, eating lunch, something on stove		P6, P7
	Juggling	Dropping balls		P2, P5
		Failure		P5
	Juggling	No choice but to juggle		P4, P5
	Juggling	Choosing to juggle		P4, P6
NEW	Juggling	Across borders		P5
	Juggling	Cooking / Working		P5
new	Worker	More pressure, demands		P4, P5, P6
	Responsibility to make it work			P6
NEW	Merging roles	“I’m not a robot”		P2, P3
new				
new	Adaptability, Flexibility			P5, P8
new	Splitting roles/Compartmentalisation			P3, P5
new	Switching roles			P3, P7
	Conflict/ Paradox	The arousal of two or things, actions, feelings that cannot be solved together	Inductive, semantic, latent	P1, P2, P3, P4

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
	Determination	Making home schooling and WFH work		P1, P2, P4, P7
new		Routine		(check others) P1, P2, P3, P5, P6,
	Challenges is this conflict? Or battles?)	Making home schooling and WFH work	Inductive, semantic, latent	P1, P3, P5
		Intensified by SEND		P5, P6
	Resourceful	Planning – getting ready beforehand for some purpose, use, or activity		P1, P5
	Career	Career progression, perception or salary		P1
	Mothering	the process of nurturing, caring for, and protecting a child by a mother or maternal figure. (APA)		P1, P4, P8
		Food provider		P1, P5, P6
	Teaching			P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
(new)		Not being 'a good enough mother'		P1, P2, P5
(new)	Working motherT - Preparing			P6
(new)	W role	More appreciated, more visible		P4, P6
(new)	W	Determination to make it work		P8
Physical: Freedom or loss of freedom				P1
	Physical space	Physical space – indoors or outdoors	Deductive, latent, semantic	P1, P3, P4, P5
		Garden		P1, P3, P4
		Home		

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
		Daily walk (as family, with friends)		P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7
		Daily walk (still juggling)		P5
(new)		Inside / Outside world – safe and unsafe		P4, P5
		Supermarket – me time		P1, P5, P6
	Metaphorical space			P1, P3, P6
	Wanting space (escape)	Any sense of being able to escape	Inductive, latent, semantic	P1
			Inductive, latent	P1
	No space (Trapped)	Not being able to get away (from work, children, house)	Inductive, latent, semantic	P1, P5
(new)	Time	Never enough		P3
(new)	Workspace/ WFH	Kitchen, bedroom ‘blended’ into home		P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
		Blended with others - Shared with others		P6, P7
(new)		No privacy		P4
(new)	Identity			
	Loss of self			P5

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
(new)	Lack of privacy	Intimacy, talking to friends		P5, P6
Crossing themes				P1
Wellbeing		a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life. *(APA)*		P1
Physical	The body	Feeling drained, fatigued, exhausted, lacking energy, nausea,		P1, P2, P4, P5
new	The Body	Never stopping		P5, P6?, P7
	The body	Stress		P3
	The body	Exercise – being fitter		P3, P6
	The body	Zoning out		P4
	The body	Eating/drinking too much		P1, P2, P4, P6, P8
	The body	Loss of touch		P5
	The body	Menopause		P6
	The body	Frozen shoulder, ruptured achilles		P4, P6
Personal	Self-care	Looking after or not looking after wellbeing		P1, P2

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (deductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Paradox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/Deductive (pre-conceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Paradox		**A tension and contradiction that can never be resolved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
Personal	Surviving			P1
		Description?		P1
	School closure 1 v School closure 2	Any differences between SC1 and SC2		P1
(new)		The weather		P1, P2, P3, P6, P7
		Mindset - this is not temporary – From novel to normality		P2, P3, P4, P6, P7
		School expectations/demands		P3, P4, P5, P6
		Alcohol consumption		P1. P2
		Prioritising wellbeing		P1, P2, P6, P8
		Setting up a more permanent workspace		P2, P3
(new)		Time blocking		P3
(new)		Vaccinations		P4, P6, P7
(new)				
(new)		Negative impact on children		P5
Positive outcome				

Themes and subthemes **Which Life-world (de-ductive)** **Overarching Existential theme: Para-dox**	**Code**	**Description**	**Inductive (from the data)/De-ductive (pre-con-ceived)/ Semantic (surface)/ Latent (making sense)**	P1
Overarching theme in the lived experience: Para-dox		**A tension and contradic-tion that can never be re-solved and does not have an either/or answer.**	**Inductive / Latent**	
	Spiritual			
	(new) – Move to	Blended Working motherT -		P1, P3
	Hybrid			P1, P2, P3, P6, P7
	New job			P1
	(new) – Move to roles	Positive outcome (post COVID)		
	Connec-tions with extended family			P6
	Being more authentic			P3
	Finding a new me			P5