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Do Mothers and Fathers in Germany Really Prefer a Traditional Division of Labor? The Impact of Working Hours on Life Satisfaction Reconsidered

Bevorzugen Mütter und Väter in Deutschland tatsächlich eine traditionelle Arbeitsteilung? Eine Neubetrachtung des Einflusses der Arbeitszeit auf die Lebenszufriedenheit

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Abstract: This study critically reexamines previous results on the effects of working hours on life satisfaction. First, we replicate the original results which suggest that a traditional division of labor maximizes fathers' and mothers' well-being. Loosening parametric restrictions, avoiding confounding by childbirth, and taking East-West differences into account in a second step, we find that (1) fathers are most satisfied when working between 35 and 60 hours per week, (2) mothers are more satisfied with their life when working at least ~25 hours per week as compared to not working, and (3) different arrangement of labor division among mothers and fathers lead to similar levels of life satisfaction. Thus, in contrast to what has been suggested by the original study, our replication reveals that the male breadwinner model is not the sole way to maximize parents' well-being.

Keywords: Gender Inequalities; Division of Labor; Subjective Well-Being; Replication; Fixed-Effects Regression.

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Zusammenfassung: In dieser Studie unterziehen wir die Ergebnisse einer Studie zum Einfluss der Arbeitszeit auf die Lebenszufriedenheit einer kritischen Überprüfung. Zunächst replizieren wir die Befunde der Ausgangsstudie, welche nahelegen, dass eine traditionelle Arbeitsteilung zwischen Müttern und Vätern deren Lebenszufriedenheit maximiert. Bei Lockerung parametrischer Annahmen, Kontrolle auf Konfundierung durch Elternschaft sowie der Berücksichtigung von Ost-West-Unterschieden zeigt sich, dass (1) Väter, die zwischen 35 und 60 Stunden pro Woche arbeiten, am zufriedensten mit Ihrem Leben sind, (2) Mütter, die mindestens ~25 Stunden pro Woche arbeiten, zufriedener mit ihrem Leben sind als nicht-erwerbstätige Mütter und (3) verschiedene Formen der Arbeitsteilung innerhalb von Haushalten zu vergleichbaren Niveaus in der Lebenszufriedenheit führen. Im Gegensatz zur Ausgangsstudie legt unsere Replikation daher nahe, dass das männliche Alleinverdienermodell keineswegs der einzige Weg zur Maximierung der elterlichen Lebenszufriedenheit ist.

Schlüsselwörter: Geschlechterungleichheit; Arbeitsteilung; subjektives Wohlbefinden; Replikation; Fixed-Effects Regression.

1 Introduction

The labor market participation of mothers and the division of unpaid work among parents have been frequent topics in the academic and public discourse in recent decades. Time and again, prominent voices in science and society have questioned the traditional role model of male breadwinners and female homemakers and proposed political measures to incentivize an equal division of unpaid and paid work among parents.

In a previous paper in this journal, Martin Schröder (2018a) contributed to this discussion by analyzing the effect of working hours on subjective well-being for men and women with and without children in Germany. For this purpose, Schröder contrasts three different theoretical positions: (1) “traditional role theory”, which – according to Schröder – predicts the highest level of life satisfaction for men and women with working hours in line with a traditional male breadwinner model dominant in society, since deviation causes distress and impairs mental well-being, (2) “family economics”, for which Schröder expects the relationships between working hours and life satisfaction of men and women to depend on the individual contribution to the household income, and (3) “expansionist role theory”, which – according to Schröder – predicts no gender differences in life satisfaction and a curvilinear relationship between working hours and life satisfaction for those with “secure jobs, little household work, little childcare work, and good childcare arrangements” (p. 68), since both women and men can profit from multiple roles under beneficial conditions.

Using different empirical tests, Schröder concludes that “[r]ather than family economics or expansionist role theory, traditional role theory thus fits the data best” and states that “fathers feel best when they adhere to a traditional male breadwinner role, while mothers can be fine with both, either working or not working (...) both fathers and mothers reach their highest life satisfaction when fathers supply about 80 percent of the couple’s hours in the labor market, while mothers supply about 20 percent.” (p. 79) Based on similar analyses for a larger sample of seven countries, Schröder (2020) has recently reiterated these conclusions about the division of labor among men and women.

While many scholars and the public might beg to disagree with these conclusions on normative grounds, we want to take a different approach. We believe that adding empirical evidence to this discussion is important. Testing implicit assumptions such as the claim that an equal division of paid labor among fathers and mothers would increase females’ subjective well-being can help to improve policy making and institutional design. Schröder’s study has the potential to make an important contribution to this discussion. However, we have some methodological concerns. Thus, we take a closer look at the original study and challenge Schröder’s findings on empirical grounds using the same data and methods. Given that Schröder concludes that his results support traditional role theory, we restrict our replication to those analyses that Schröder uses to test this theoretical approach. Testing family economics and expansionist role theory goes beyond the

scope of this paper and would require additional theoretical and methodological assumptions that may not hold.

After successfully replicating Schröder’s original results, we show that some key findings only hold under certain modeling conditions. We contend that these conditions lead to biased estimates and wrong conclusions due to three reasons: (1) overly strong parametric restrictions on the functional form of the association between working hours and life satisfaction, (2) confounding of the effects of parenthood and working hours, and (3) overlooking important differences between East and West Germany. After taking these problems into account, some of the key findings substantially change and can no longer serve as a justification of traditional gender roles.

In particular, we want to focus on a set of three inter-related and, at least for us, somewhat surprising findings in Schröder’s (2018a) paper:

- (1) “Fathers and childless men reach their highest life satisfaction values at around 50 hours of work per week.” (p. 71)
- (2) “The life satisfaction of mothers is very unresponsive to working hours; their life satisfaction is always around 7.2 to 7.3, regardless of how much they work.” (p. 71)
- (3) “Fathers are most satisfied when they contribute about 80 percent of the couple’s total working hours to the market, while mothers are most satisfied when they contribute about 20 percent of the couple’s total working hours.” (p. 78)

After briefly explaining the setup of our replication in the next section, we will examine each of these three empirical claims more closely in sections 3 to 5.

2 Our Setup for Replication

As a first step of our replication, we used the analysis code provided by Schröder (2018b) on GESIS Datorium. Based on that and, as in the original paper, using SOEP v32 (1984–2015, version 32.1, doi: 10.5684/soep.v32.1; Goebel et al. 2019) we were able to reproduce Schröder’s results. It is worth mentioning that, in contrast to some other replication codes, the analysis was well documented, and the code was complete. Without much additional effort, we could directly use it for a push-button reproduction.

In addition to this push-button reproduction, we decided to prepare the data again from scratch using the more recent and slightly improved SOEP v35 (1984–2017, version 35, doi: 10.5684/soep-core.v35) for our following

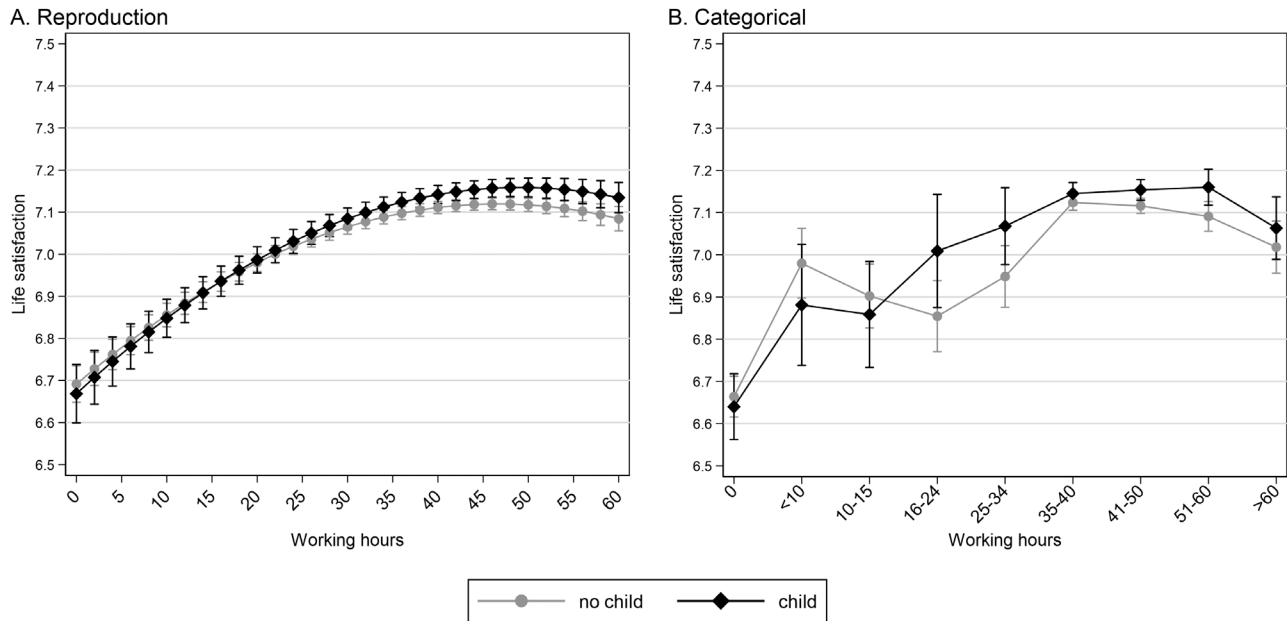


Fig. 1: The effect of working hours on life satisfaction for men

Notes: SOEP 1984–2015, version 35; fixed effects models controlling for age, health satisfaction, marital status, unemployment, maternity leave and place of residence; $N=30,347$ persons and 205,586 person-years; Estimates are reported in table A2 in the appendix.

replication. The main reason for this was to get a better understanding for the researcher's choices regarding sample selection and variable coding and to identify potentially problematic choices when preparing the SOEP for the analysis. In general, we detected no major flaws and mainly followed Schröder's selection and coding of all variables. Based on that we were able to replicate Schröder's results with version v35 (excluding 2016–2018; for a comparison see Figure A1).

Contrary to data preparation, we deviated in the exact specification of the estimated model from the original study (see appendix A1 for a detailed description of data preparation and model specification). In the original paper, Schröder applies both random- and fixed-effect models to test his hypotheses. Given that Schröder is interested in the causal effect of working hours on life satisfaction, we restrict our replication to fixed effects panel regressions. For the same reason, we also report only models controlling for potential confounders in the main text. In order to avoid multiple interaction terms between gender and some of the covariates, we estimated separate models for men and women instead of one joint model for men and women.¹

In the following, we visually display the results from the estimated fixed effects models which are based on the relationship between intra-individual changes in working hours and life satisfaction (for the respective regression tables see the appendix). In order to facilitate a more intuitive interpretation of the graphs, we added the grand mean in life satisfaction – the constant in the estimated fixed effects model – to the estimated within-changes of each working hour category for persons with and without children. Thus, the graphs depict an as-if scenario, in which, *ceteris paribus*, all individuals have the same baseline level of life satisfaction and react in a similar way to a given change in working hours.

3 Do 50 hours of work really maximize fathers' life satisfaction?

Despite these changes in the exact specification of the model, we were still able to successfully replicate the findings of Schröder for men with and without children. As can be seen in Figure 1 panel A, life satisfaction (measured on a scale from 0 to 10) of men substantially increases with rising working hours. According to a model with controls and a quadratic specification of the effect of working hours on life satisfaction, life satisfaction of childless men

¹ As a sensitivity check, we additionally ran separate models for men and women with and without children. As can be seen in Figure A3 in the appendix, results were robust to this alternative specification.

reaches its peak at 46.6 working hours, while fathers seem to be most satisfied when working 49.1 hours.

So far, our findings are completely in line with the results by Schröder. However, these results are based on the assumption that the association between working hours and life satisfaction can be adequately described by a quadratic function. While the quadratic function indeed captures the overall pattern quite well, we contend that the reported peak in life satisfaction at almost 50 hours for fathers is driven by this simplifying assumption. Our claim is substantiated by the results of a model using a more flexible specification: separate dummy variables for certain working hour intervals.²

Panel B in Figure 1 shows the results of such a model. We want to highlight two points: First, there is a substantial and statistically significant gap in life satisfaction of non-working and working fathers. Average levels of life satisfaction for non-working fathers are more than 0.2 scale points lower than those for fathers being marginally employed with less than 10 or 10–15 hours. Second, differences in life satisfaction between fathers working part-time, full-time, and overtime are smaller than suggested by Panel A. While Schröder's focus lies on *peaks* in life satisfaction, the empirical picture points more in the direction of a life satisfaction *plateau* which men reach when working full-time. There is no statistically significant difference in the life satisfaction of fathers working 35–40 hours, 41–50, or 51–60 hours, but working more than 60 hours statistically significantly reduces life satisfaction. A similar pattern shows up for childless men.³

Thus, while our findings corroborate Schröder's claim that fathers with long working hours are in general more satisfied with their lives, our results also show that fathers do not have the highest life satisfaction when working around 50 hours as claimed by Schröder but are equally satisfied with working less yet still full-time.

² This categorical specification is more flexible than a quadratic specification since the former allows for different patterns in the association between working hours and life satisfaction than the latter. A categorical specification also contains all possible patterns captured by a quadratic specification as special cases, while the reverse is not true. At the same time, a categorical specification still involves certain decisions by the researchers. In particular, we needed to choose the width of intervals for each category and faced a trade-off between a fine-grained categorization of working hours on the one hand and securing a sufficient number of cases in each category on the other hand.

³ Here and in the following, statements about statistical significance are based on formal significance tests. Because we conducted such tests for differences between various subgroups, we do not provide details on these tests in the main text but in the code for our analysis only.

4 Do mothers really not care about employment?

Similar to the analyses for men, we started to reproduce the results for women based on the code provided by Schröder and replicate them based on our own code. Again, both approaches lead to the same results and support the conclusions reported in the original paper. Panel A in Figure 2 shows a positive but non-linear association between working hours and life satisfaction for childless women. Childless women are most satisfied with their life when working 42.9 hours. In contrast to that, the association between working hours and life satisfaction for mothers is much weaker. For example, an increase from zero to 40 working hours goes along with a change of only $7.12 - 7.03 = 0.09$ scale points in mothers' life satisfaction. Most of these differences in life satisfaction across the distribution of working hours are not statistically significant.

Using a categorical specification instead provides a more nuanced picture. In Panel B, the patterns for childless women and mothers are remarkably similar over a wide range of working hours, with a plateau in life satisfaction at around 25 to 40 working hours for mothers. However, life satisfaction is statistically significantly lower for non-working childless women than for non-working mothers. Nonetheless, life satisfaction of mothers is statistically significantly higher when working between 25 and 40 hours compared to working 15 hours or less. This contradicts Schröder's conclusion that mothers' life satisfaction is very unresponsive to working hours.

Next, we focus on two aspects which appear particularly important for the effects of working hours on life satisfaction for mothers: First, given the higher labor market attachment of mothers in East Germany, variation in the availability of public childcare, and differences in gender roles attitudes between East and West Germany (e.g. Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2017), it is important to take regional differences into account. Second, the previous analyses might be biased due the birth of a child, as this event affects working hours, which may lead to time conflicts between work and family and – at least in the first year – positively affects life satisfaction (e.g. Preisner et al. 2015). Thereby, the effect of childbirth might differ between East and West Germany and might depend on the age of the youngest child.

Panels C and D in Figure 2 provide estimates from separate models for women in East and West Germany with a categorical specification and control for the age of the youngest child. For both East and West Germany, we find similar results when excluding mothers with children aged

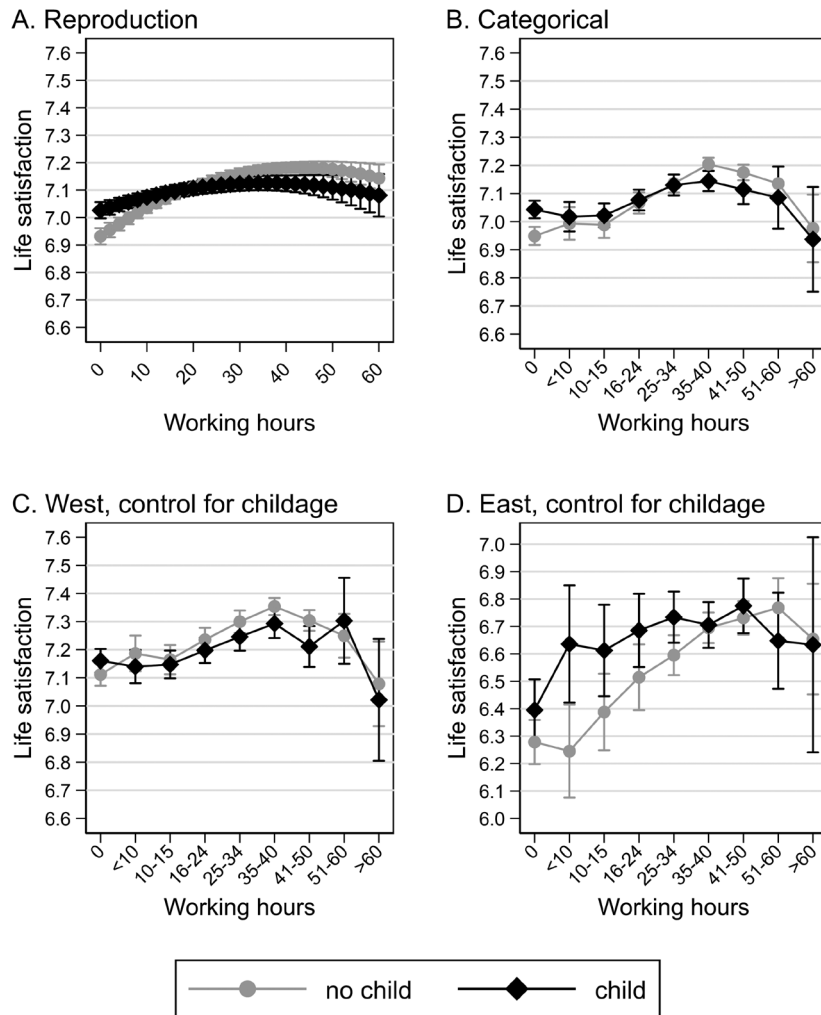


Fig. 2: The effect of working hours on life satisfaction for women in East and West Germany

Notes: SOEP 1984–2015, version 35; fixed effects models controlling for age, health satisfaction, marital status, unemployment, maternity leave and place of residence; for details on sample size, model statistics and estimates see Table A3 and Table A4 in the appendix.

below two years from the sample (see appendix figure A2 and table A8) instead of controlling for the age of youngest child.

Despite these changes in the sample and set of covariates, the results in Panel C for West German women mirror the results from Panel B. The only major difference is that – as expected – the small gap in life satisfaction between childless women and mothers with zero working hours almost completely disappears. As further analyses in appendix A4 show, this is not due to the restriction to West Germany but caused by controlling for the age of the youngest child and hence likely reflects the positive effect of motherhood on well-being in the first years.

In contrast to Schröder’s conclusion that “the results appear irrespective of East-West German heritage” (p. 79), the empirical picture markedly changes when looking at the results for East German women in Panel D. While the pattern for childless women in East Germany is similar to the ones in West Germany, mothers in East Germany are particularly dissatisfied when not working at all. For

example, the effect of working between 35 and 40 hours increases life satisfaction by around 0.31 scale points for mothers in East Germany compared to an effect of 0.13 scale points for mothers in West Germany. Additional analyses restricted to mothers (available upon request) show that the effect of working compared to not working at all is statistically significantly stronger for mothers in East than for mothers in West Germany for all working hour categories below 50 hours. However, among working mothers in East Germany, life satisfaction appears to be rather unresponsive to the exact amount of working hours. As further analyses in appendix A4 reveal, the change in effect patterns for East Germany is not mainly due to the control of the age of the youngest children and thus reflects regional differences.

Overall, we find the effect of working hours on life satisfaction for mothers depends on East-West differences as well as the age of the youngest child. Our analysis clearly shows that working hours have stronger effects on the subjective well-being for women living in East versus West

Germany. Furthermore, using a categorical specification of working hours, differences in the relationship of working hours and life satisfaction between West German women with and without children almost completely disappear after controlling for the age of the youngest child.

5 Happy housewife, happy breadwinner – is a 20–80 split the best?

Given our results, the question emerges whether Schröder's claims about the division of paid labor within couples can be supported. As before, we replicated his results on the division of labor within the household. In line with the original paper, Panel A in Figure 3 suggests that childless men are most satisfied with a share of 60 percent and fathers with a share of up to 80 percent. However, as explained before, it is important to use a categorical specification to avoid overly restrictive parametric assumptions. Panel B maps the estimates of such a more flexible model for men and shows that, in contrast to the quadratic specification, satisfaction of fathers does *not* peak at a share of 80 percent of working hours. Instead, the results point in the direction of a plateau, which already starts at a roughly equal division of working hours for both childless men and fathers. Contributing more than a share of 40–60 percent to the household only slightly affects men's life satisfaction, even if they perform 100 percent of the paid employment in the household (in the following called "breadwinner").⁴ In contrast to that, men are statistically significantly less satisfied with their life when their partner is the sole breadwinner. Results from separate models for men in West (Panel C) and East Germany (Panel D) are in line with these patterns with the exception that, as compared to households with a rather equal share, satisfaction is statistically significantly lower for childless men than for fathers which are the sole breadwinner in East Germany.

Next, we turn to the results for women. Panel E replicates the results of the original study which Schröder interprets as follows: Childless women are most satisfied with a roughly equal share and mothers with a share of 10 to 30 percent. However, Panel E might be also interpreted in a

different way, which becomes even clearer when looking at the estimates using a categorical specification in Panel F: Rather than a peak, the results point in the direction of a plateau with very similar levels of life satisfaction across large parts of the distribution of working hours, including an equal division of working hours. The plateau in life satisfaction is reached for a share of 21 to 60 percent for childless women and for a share of 0 to 50 percent for mothers.

Results for women in West Germany (Panel G) mirror these results, while we find a slightly different pattern for women in East Germany (Panel H). Women in East Germany are least satisfied if one person in the household is the sole breadwinner. For both childless women and mothers we find a statistically significantly lower life satisfaction compared to a rather equal share. For childless East German women, life satisfaction reaches the plateau for a share of working hours of around 21 to 99 percent, while satisfaction of East German mothers reaches the plateau for a share of 1 to 50 percent.⁵

Overall, our analyses for the share of working hours reveal that both childless men and fathers appear equally satisfied with a roughly equal division of paid labor and with being the major or only breadwinner. Contributing less than 40 percent, especially when having a partner who is the sole breadwinner, clearly negatively affects the life satisfaction of men. This general pattern applies for West and East German men. Results for women show that they are equally satisfied with a rather equal division of paid labor and with contributing less than their partner, although we find differences for East and West German women. While contributing less than the partner leads to an only slight decline in life satisfaction for women in West Germany, women in East Germany show a statistically significantly lower life satisfaction if the male partner is the sole breadwinner compared to a more equal share.

6 Conclusions

Our replication of a paper by Martin Schröder (2018a) on the influence of working hours on the life satisfaction of childless men and women, fathers, and mothers in Germany published in this journal supported on the one hand some of his findings. In particular, our replication corroborated the claim that longer working hours (up to a certain thresh-

⁴ The term "breadwinner" somewhat oversimplifies the situation, because we analyze the share of working hours within the household. The share of working hours does not necessarily correspond to the share of income the individual partner contributes to the household.

⁵ The average life satisfaction of mothers appears to be highest for a share of working hours of 1 to 20 percent. However, this difference is not statistically significant from life satisfaction for a share of 21 to 50 percent.

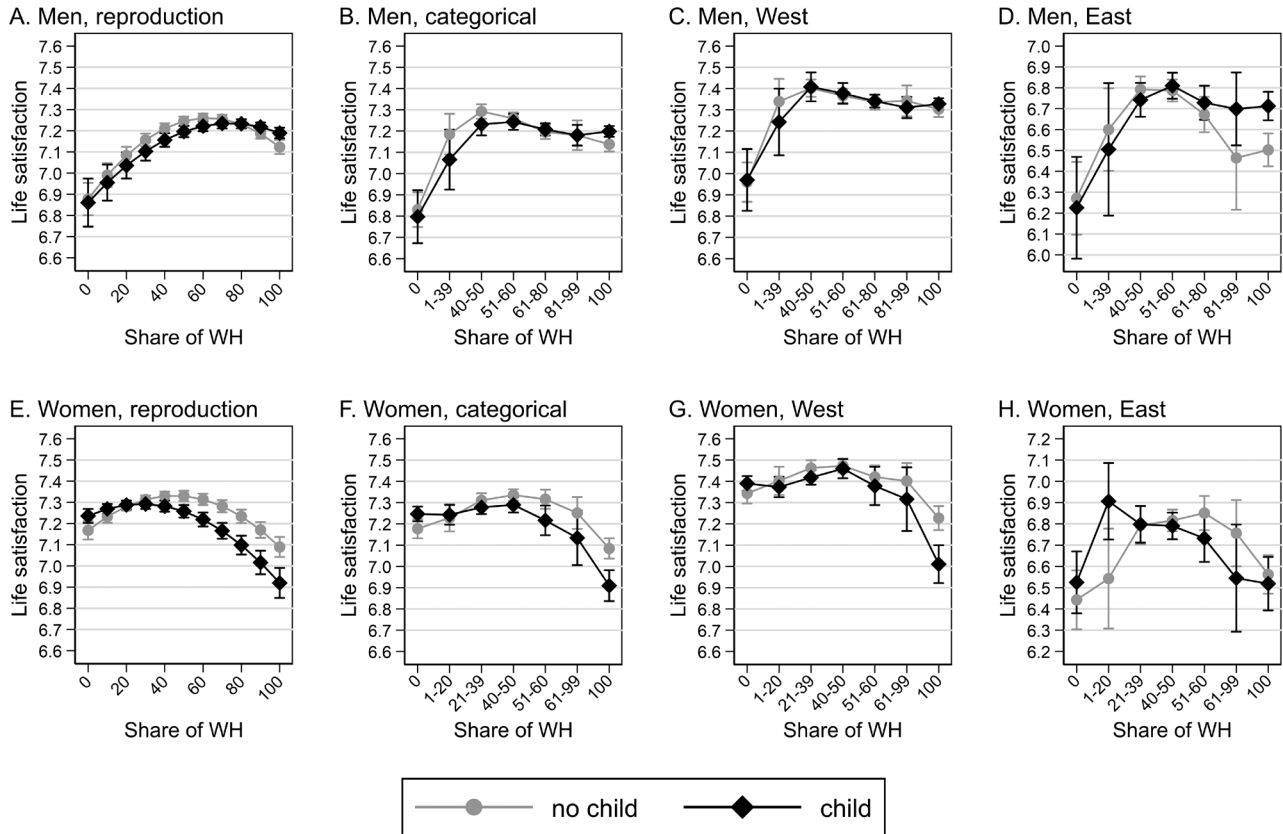


Fig. 3: Effect of share of working hours on life satisfaction

Notes: SOEP 1984–2015, version 35; fixed effects models controlling for age, health satisfaction, marital status, unemployment, maternity leave and place of residence; for details on sample size, model statistics and estimates see Table A5 and Table A6 in the appendix.

old) go along with an increase in life satisfaction of men and that they, in line with traditional role theory, still strive for full-time employment. Furthermore, long working hours seem to negatively affect the life satisfaction of women with and without children. This especially applies to mothers with small children younger than two years old.

On the other hand, our replication also raised doubts about some of the original findings and helped to put other results into context. Loosening parametric restrictions, avoiding confounding by childbirth, and taking East-West differences into account, our re-analyses show that:

- Fathers do not maximize their well-being when working 50 hours or more but are equally satisfied when working less as long as they work full-time (see section 3).
- Mothers in West and East Germany are more satisfied with their life when working at least 25 hours per week compared to not working. The association between mothers' working hours and life satisfaction is stronger in East than West Germany (see section 4).
- Mothers and fathers with a roughly equal division of working hours are equally satisfied with their life as

mothers who work a bit less and as fathers who are the major or only breadwinner. We do not find evidence that an 80–20 split maximizes life satisfaction but rather that different arrangements of labor division lead to similar levels of life satisfaction. Again, we find different patterns for women in East compared to West Germany (see section 5).

Against this background, this paper raises concerns about the core conclusion of Schröder's study that "the results pose a challenge to those who suggest that men and women should be incentivized to work similar hours, as they showed that fathers and mothers are most satisfied with an 80–20 split of working hours" (p. 79). Our findings reveal that traditional gender roles still exist but are less prevalent than suggested in the original study. Thereby, it is striking that a wide range of working hours leads to rather similar levels of life satisfaction. This empirical picture is more adequately described as plateaus than as peaks in life satisfaction and reflects the fact that different living arrangements can lead to high levels of satisfaction.

Therefore, an 80–20 split as a one-for-all solution, which is supposed to maximize well-being of most couples, is hard to justify on empirical grounds even under the current unfavorable institutional and cultural conditions for gender equality in Germany. Men and women seem to be quite satisfied with a rather equal division of work despite the currently often unequal split of unpaid work among partners and restricted availability of public childcare. We can only speculate about the effects of working hours on life satisfaction of mothers and fathers in a hypothetical world with more favorable institutional and cultural conditions, but in face of the documented East-West differences, it seems likely that gender differences in the effects of working hours on life satisfaction would become even weaker in such a setting.

Although our contribution refrains from a detailed discussion of the theoretical arguments presented by Schröder and a replication of his analyses aiming to test these different arguments, our findings are less in support of “traditional role theory” than those presented in the original paper. Given that the relationship between working hours and life satisfaction can better be described by plateaus than peaks, pronounced differences depending on the place of living, and the age of the youngest child, our findings are more in line with expansionist role theory, according to which multiple roles can enhance subjective well-being under specific beneficial conditions that avoid overload and distress (Barnett & Hyde 2001).

However, future research that uses sophisticated empirical tests is needed to analyze the specific conditions under which multiple roles can indeed enhance subjective well-being of men and women. In his paper, Schröder proposed and conducted such tests, among others, by taking job security, satisfaction with childcare arrangement, hours spent for unpaid work, and the relative gross hourly income of women compared to their male partner into account. However, these tests rely on further theoretical assumptions and might partly also suffer from selection (e. g., selection into working hours, employment types, and regional contexts). Due to these concerns, we did not replicate these analyses, while developing new tests goes beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, our different findings for East and West Germany as well as for taking the age of the youngest child into account highlight that the effect of working hours in life satisfaction is conditional and context dependent.

Besides these substantive conclusions, we also want to highlight a few methodological insights from this replication: First, one should be cautious with overly restrictive parametric specifications. In the current case, the quadratic function mapped the overall patterns quite well, but

nonetheless provided a distorted picture of the actual association between working hours and life satisfaction. Thus, in case of imposing parametric restrictions, the robustness of results should be tested using a more flexible specification. Second, it is commonly known that not controlling for variables such as childbirth, which influence both the amount and division of working hours (X) and subjective well-being (Y), leads to biased estimates. Confounding is also an issue for more sophisticated analyses of observational data such as fixed effects panel models. Thorough theorizing can help to identify confounders and in complex scenarios involving more than three variables, the use of directed acyclic graphs can be helpful. Third, potential effect heterogeneity should be taken seriously. As shown in this paper, neglecting effect heterogeneity, such as differences between East and West Germany that are relevant for the research topic, can be misleading. In the worst case of opposing effects in two subgroups, ignoring effect heterogeneity can result in misleading estimates suggesting a null effect. In the more common scenario of varying strength of effects, research which does not take heterogeneity seriously misses theoretically and practically important differences across subgroups.

Finally, we want to raise awareness for an alarming tendency in applied panel analysis to implicitly conflate average treatment effects and average treatment effects on the treated. Schröder’s statements about the life satisfaction of people in traditional arrangements in the conclusion section provide a case in point: “it seems likely that their life satisfaction would decline if they were forced to live and act differently.” (p. 79). While fixed effects models allow to control for unobserved heterogeneity caused by selection into both working hours and parenthood and help to identify causal effects under weaker assumptions than other approaches, they – at best – only provide estimates for the effect of a change in working hours on life satisfaction for individuals with such a change (average treatment effect on the treated). Whether other individuals without such a change within the observation window would react in a similar way (average treatment effect on the untreated), is far from clear and requires strong assumptions. For example, predicting that couples with a traditional division of labor would have the same level of life satisfaction if they switched to a more equal division of labor clearly reveals the neglect of important individual and structural reasons of why men and women work as many hours as they do. The dependence on such implicit assumptions is well-known in causal inference literature (see Morgan & Winship, 2015), but still seems to need more time to completely trickle down into applied research.

Replication Files

The code for our replication will be publicly and permanently available at the GESIS Datorium (Heyne and Wolbring 2022).

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Ausgewählte Publikationen: Subjective Well-Being Scarring through Unemployment: New Evidence from a Long-running Panel (with A. Eberl & M. Collischon), *Social Forces* (online first, doi: 10.1093/sf/soac022); How to Deal With Reverse Causality Using Panel Data? Recommendations for Researchers Based on a Simulation Study (with L. Leszczensky), *Sociological Methods & Research* (2022); Needs, Comparisons, and Adaptation: The Importance of Relative Income for Life Satisfaction (with M. Keuschnigg & E. Negele), *European Sociological Review* (2013).