

Exposé

The influence of paid and unpaid work and household division of work on wellbeing

An analysis of two-parent households in Europe

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Introduction

In recent decades, significant changes in attitudes towards family models and the division of paid and unpaid work between men and women could be observed.¹ The declining relevance of traditional family models consisting of a male breadwinner and a female caregiver in favor of more egalitarian dual-income models (Gerhard 2015, p. 12f.; Esping-Andersen 2016, p. 99f.) has resulted in increased female labor force participation and a shift towards greater sharing of household and caregiving responsibilities by men and women in Europe (Mencarini & Sironi 2012, p. 203 f.). Irrespective of the positive and empowering effects this development has had on women (Mencarini & Sironi 2012, p. 203), it has also shed light on the multiple strains they are confronted with while juggling their professional life and unpaid work. While gender inequalities are decreasing, the distribution of paid and unpaid work is far from being equal. As illustrated by the ‘gender care gap’ (BMFSFJ 2019, online), unpaid work is still predominantly carried out by women (Ferrant et al. 2014, p. 2ff.). Research suggests that this may have important implications for the wellbeing of individuals, families, and women in particular. Previous research has examined gender differences in wellbeing and has found a correlation between spending long hours on unpaid work within the family and experiencing lower levels of wellbeing (Boye 2009, p. 522). The aim of our intended study is thus to investigate if and to what extent gender-based differences in wellbeing are influenced by the division of paid and unpaid work in two-parent households with children in Europe. The following research question is at the core of our project: *How does wellbeing depend on the extent and the share of paid and unpaid work in two-parent households with children in Europe?*

The aim of this study is to find out if there is a relationship between the extent and the share of the work carried out by a person and their wellbeing as well as how the relationship between wellbeing and the amount of unpaid work changes when the share of total unpaid work increases. We suggest that paid as well as unpaid work can lower the wellbeing of individuals.

¹ Throughout the paper the term paid work will be used to refer to wage labor, while the term unpaid work functions as an umbrella term for concepts such as care work and domestic work. It thereby includes informally provided unpaid tasks such as childcare, care for the elderly, housework and homemaking. Other work, which typically does not involve payment but is also not related to the household sphere, such as volunteering, is not considered in this concept of unpaid work. The term total work refers to the sum of all paid and unpaid labor.

While various factors with the power to influence wellbeing exist, we chose to explore the relevance of the absolute hours of work individuals carry out as well as the relative division of the work among couples. The focus on hours of work as a measure for wellbeing in this study can be explained by the fact that they are not only easy to measure but also by its persistent actuality on inequality concerning the division of labor.

We hypothesize that:

H1a: There is a negative linear relationship between the total amount of work carried out by a person and their wellbeing.

H1b: There is a negative linear relationship between the share of the total work carried out by a person in comparison to their partner and their wellbeing.

H2: The extent of unpaid work carried out by a person negatively influences their wellbeing.

H3: The negative relationship between the extent of unpaid work and wellbeing is intensified the lower the partner's share of unpaid work.

In accordance with macroeconomic labor supply theory, there is broad consent of the fact that work is a source of disutility or pain (as discussed in Spencer 2003, p. 235ff.) and that disutility increases with hours of work (Bofinger 2020, p. 160ff.). Although the concept originally focused on paid work as a source of disutility, more recent papers also point towards a connection between lower wellbeing and hours of unpaid work (Boye 2009, p. 522). Therefore, the underlying assumption of the hypotheses mentioned above is that the more time a person spends on paid or unpaid work, the more negatively one's individual wellbeing is perceived.

Since there has been a rise in women's employment that has not been fully matched by an increase in the unpaid work carried out by men (Lewis, Campbell & Huerta 2008, p. 21), the distribution of work appears highly unequal and therefore unjust. The situation during the covid-19 pandemic has further confirmed this inequality regarding the division of unpaid work among men and women (BMJ 2021). We assume that this burden of disproportionately more hours of unpaid work women face has an especially negative effect on the perceived wellbeing of women. Furthermore, we assume that this effect is enhanced the less egalitarian care work is divided between partners.

The division of work, wellbeing, and gender

The discussion about the private and social division of labor is a central issue in the field of gender equity. The origin of the socially lower rate of women performing paid work as well as the higher rate of women carrying out unpaid work is rooted in the traditional gender-specific division of labor. Consequently, women are confronted with lower pay and various structural disadvantages (Goppel et al. 2016, p. 383). Research on the division of paid and unpaid work in Europe has shown that despite some progress towards gender equality, women still perform a disproportionate amount of unpaid work in households with children. This unequal distribution of work has been linked to lower levels of wellbeing for women (Mencarini & Sironi 2012, p. 216). Considering the ‘gender care gap’, not much has changed in recent years. On average, women in Germany still carry out about 50 per cent more unpaid work than men (BMFSFJ 2019, online). This raises the question of how discrimination against care and household activities can be counteracted and whether these should perhaps even be regarded as services - which in turn raises the problem of the economization of care work (Goppel et al., 2016, p. 383). The relevance of this argument for this article is highlighted by the fact, that the division of work and woman’s disproportionate share have been shown to lower wellbeing and contribute to sex differences in depression (BMJ, 2021).

Individual wellbeing or happiness and the extent to which it is affected by gender equality is a topic of great interest in the scientific community. Studies have investigated the relationship between the amount of unpaid work carried out by the individual and the associated level of happiness (Mencarini & Sironi 2012). While the extent to which happiness, unpaid work and gender inequality play together has been of interest in various studies (Mencarini & Sironi 2012; Boyle 2009), we know of no recent publications on the topic. The relevance of this article can thus partly be explained by a contribution to actuality within this field of study.

The significance of our research interest lies in the relative division of labor between couples. This is also a feature that distinguishes our study from already existing ones. While in other studies the context and the subjective character of wellbeing played a crucial role (Mencarini & Sironi 2012; Boyle 2009), we strive to properly evaluate also the extent to which the share of work the partner does affects the individual level of wellbeing.

Data and Methods

The data used for our analysis is retrieved from the European social survey (ESS) Round 5 from 2010. At present, this dataset is the most recent one available that is equipped with variables for hours of housework, which are highly relevant for our research. Currently, our sample consists of 8,373 individuals from 26 European countries, of whom 3,600 (43%) are female and 4,773 (57%) are male. The group at the center of our research are two-parent households with children, therefore respondents without children and single parents have been excluded from the sample. In addition to that, non-working (paid and/or unpaid) respondents, such as students, pensioners and unemployed people have been excluded, as the challenges of reconciling paid, and unpaid work are fundamental to our analysis.

The dependent variable (DV) “wellbeing” used for our analysis is 3/5 of the WHO-Five wellbeing Index, which will be expanded to form a new index including the variables “happy” and “stflife”, which measure level of happiness and satisfaction with life respectively. The independent variable (IV) used for the regressions will vary depending on the model. In total three differing IVs will be used – one for every regression model carried out. The IVs in question are variables concerned with the extent or share of work of the respondent. Depending on the context of the regression, it will be either calculated as the amount of total work carried out by the respondent (Model 1), the share of total work in relation to the partner’s share (Model 2) and the extent of unpaid work carried out by the respondent (Model 3). Model 3 will additionally be calculated using an interaction term of the respondent’s extent of unpaid work and their partner’s share. Further, potential impact of factors such as political attitudes, education, the number of children living in the household, and the respondent’s country of residence needs to be accounted for. Therefore, these factors will be considered as control variables in our study.

As we assume that the division of paid and unpaid work varies depending on whether the respondent is female or male, we are expecting different results in our regressions based on the respondent’s gender. To properly account for this, our OLS-regression models will be calculated separately for men and women.

Conclusion

It is expected that this study finds a negative relationship between a person's wellbeing and the total extent and share of their total work. In addition, the amount of unpaid work performed by a person is thought to be negatively correlated with their wellbeing and that this negative relationship of unpaid work and wellbeing is intensified in accordance with the partner's share in unpaid work.

Since it is assumed that women have historically carried a disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and home care responsibilities, which was additionally strengthened by covid-19, the results of this research could provide an impetus for social policy measures that focus on an equitable distribution of paid and unpaid work in two-parent households. (BJM 2021, p. 1) Transformative change for that matter would require policy that recognizes, reduces, and redistributes unpaid work. As a possible policy implication that could emerge from this research project is that the government could try to create more structural framework that allows free childcare and the employment of carers from the family environment. In this way, the government would take over a share of the unpaid work or make it possible to employ family members and thus transform unpaid work into paid work. Furthermore, it would also make sense to take measures that promote a fairer distribution of unpaid and paid work between the parents themselves. Here, the upgrading of part-time work for this population group or reductions in working hours, in general, appear to be promising options. This would provide both parents with time in which unpaid work can be shared without sacrificing the amount of income from paid work. (BJM 2021, p. 3)

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