

# A Subjective Well-Being Perspective on Work-Family Balance

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Childbearing is associated with a decline in parental Subjective Well-Being (SWB) in the short term (see Kohler and Mencarini, 2016 for a review) and parents experiencing lower SWB after the onset of parenthood often postpone, or even forego, having additional children (Margolis and Myrskylä, 2015). However, the effect of children on SWB is mediated by work-family conflict (Matysiak et al. 2016), and the mother's potential dissatisfaction with work-family balance and couple's relationship plays critical roles in the decision making process of having additional children (Luppi, 2016).

Building on these recent results, this paper focuses on the crucial challenge faced by parents to the reconciliation of work and family roles. We argue that satisfaction with the work-family balance matters for SWB among parents. In order to test this hypothesis, we adopt the psychological operationalization of the work and family balance referred to as role-related satisfaction, which is the perception of being competent, effective and socially rewarded in each role, as theorized by the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

In the socio-demographic literature, work-family balance is defined as experiencing well-distributed resources in both family and work, which implies that commitment and efforts are well-allocated in both life spheres, and therefore characterized by low conflict (Voydanoff, 2005). However, this perspective does not take into account two important implications, which are instead central in the psychology. The first issue regards the traditional definition of work-family balance as the relative level of commitment in each role. Senécal and colleagues (2001) demonstrate that studies on work-family conflict overlook the *satisfaction* derived from being committed in the corresponding roles. The relevance of considering the satisfaction of the individual within each role has been, on the contrary, well-established in psychology. In Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) the level of satisfaction of three basic psychological needs (*autonomy*, *competence* and *relatedness*) serves as the prerequisite for reaching a higher SWB. In other words, the level of satisfaction on the basic psychological needs in family and work life mirrors the individual's perception of being competent, effective and socially rewarded in family and work roles. In this sense, the higher the satisfaction related to the basic psychological needs, the higher is the commitment, and the higher is the derived SWB. The second issue concerns the concept of *self-*

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<sup>2</sup> The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from the European Research Council under the European ERC Grant Agreement no StG-313617 (SWELL-FER: Subjective Well-being and Fertility, P.I. Letizia Mencarini).

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*complexity* (Linville, 1985), which refers to individuals' possibility to identify one's self with a large set of social roles. It means that a number of social roles, whose relevance for the individual can change over time, defines one's identity. An important argument of self-complexity is that individuals can compensate between positive and negative experiences across different roles. Therefore, a bad performance in one role does not necessarily decrease the individual's overall SWB.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the relationship between work-family balance and SWB by integrating the concepts of self-determination and self-complexity, and by verifying whether: [1] Work and family roles are interrelated and influence the overall SWB possibly through compensation effects; [2] Work and family roles have or not equal importance in determining the overall SWB; and [3] Basic psychological needs satisfaction within each role impacts SWB according to the intrinsic relevance of the role.

Furthermore, gender differences in work-family balance for parents may, at least in part, explain the differing importance of work and family roles for the individual's SWB. As such, we expect basic psychological needs satisfaction in parenting being more important for mothers' SWB. Having children increases family duties, but mothers are more prone to reduce their labor market participation, weakening their bargaining power in terms of household responsibilities and preferences (Bunning, 2015).

Our study considers a sample of individuals from the third and fourth waves of the German PAIRFAM panel survey. We analyze the relationship between work-family balance and SWB for sub-samples of parents and working parents, and we do so separately by gender. Germany is characterized by low fertility<sup>4</sup>, with inadequate family policies to sustain mothers' employment and with widespread traditional gender values. The female homemaker and male breadwinner model is common among couples with children, largely driven by limited provision of publicly subsidized childcare.

In order to evaluate the effect of basic needs satisfaction in couple relationship, parenting, and working spheres on the individual's SWB (here, overall life satisfaction and mental health), we model the relationship using both Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and Fixed Effects (FE) regressions with robust standard errors. With OLS we want to verify whether the expected correlations between the three needs and the SWB are present. Fixed effect models take into account whether the actual satisfaction of the basic needs is related to a change in the SWB of the individuals. Models have been run separated by gender, for the overall sample, the sub-sample of parents and working parents.

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<sup>4</sup> The Total Fertility Rate in 2015 was 1.4 children per woman.

Our results support the idea that satisfaction within work and family spheres affects women and men's SWB differently. The satisfaction in the parenting and couple relationship is more relevant for women's SWB, while the working spheres is more predominant for men. These results are not surprising in a context where traditional gender values are still common. The motivation behind the family-related roles is stronger in determining women's well-being, while men's well-being is more dependent upon the satisfaction with their work-related role. In the cognitive evaluation of their lives, women and men need to feel competent as parent, as workers and partner in order to be satisfied and experience positive emotions. However, being a good worker is particularly important for men's SWB, while being a good mother is more relevant for women's SWB. In addition, work-related stress affects working fathers more than working mothers, which on the contrary, are more depressed by difficulties within their family roles.

This paper is part of the research activity carried out under a ERC project called "SWELL-FER" (P.I. Letizia Mencarini), which investigates the relationship between subjective well-being and fertility. The project benefits from the collaboration of a group of international researchers (demographers, sociologists, economists and psychologists). The paper has been already presented in some international conferences (i.e. EPC – European Population Conference, at Le Mainz, August 2016 and the European Consortium for Sociological Research conference in Oxford, September 2016).

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