

CLOSING THE HAPPINESS GAP

The Decline of Gendered Parenthood Norms and the Increase in Parental Life Satisfaction

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In recent decades, normative expectations for parenthood have changed for both men and women, fertility has declined, and work–family arrangements have become more egalitarian. Previous studies indicate that the transition to parenthood and work–family arrangements both influence life satisfaction and do so differently for men and women. Drawing on constructivism and utility maximization, we theorize how gendered parenthood norms influence life satisfaction after the transition to parenthood, and how decisions regarding motherhood and fatherhood are made in order to maximize life satisfaction. We hypothesize that the rise of gender-egalitarian patterns has contributed to closing the parental happiness gap, and that the effects of motherhood and fatherhood on life satisfaction have converged. We test these assumptions by drawing on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (1984–2015) and applying a series of hybrid panel regressions to estimate motherhood and fatherhood effects on life satisfaction in Western Germany over the last three decades. We then trace trends in these effects back to changing parenthood norms.

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The results indicate that the implications of parenthood have converged for men and women. As support for a gendered division of labor has lost ground, the transition to parenthood has become increasingly conducive to life satisfaction for both genders, and the parental happiness gap has vanished.

Keywords: *motherhood; fatherhood; life satisfaction; parenthood norms; Germany; gender*

In the mid-twentieth century, the so-called golden age of marriage, childlessness was at an all-time low in Western Germany (Dorbritz and Ruckdeschel 2013). Parenthood was the quasi-natural standard for men and, even more so for women, whereas childlessness was equated with incompleteness and viewed as a major source of dissatisfaction (Eggebeen and Knoester 2001; Hansen 2012). Although having a family is still generally seen as a major ingredient of a fulfilled life (Sobotka and Testa 2008), parenthood norms have changed considerably since then. In Western Germany, support for the male breadwinner model has eroded and given way to more gender-equal arrangements (Cooke 2004; Lück 2006), and childfree life courses have become more acceptable (Bujard 2015). Mothers have more options to reconcile career and family. Fatherhood, on the other hand, has become more loaded with parental “duties,” while the expectation of fathers being the main breadwinners has remained constant.

A number of recent publications have described the challenges of contemporary parenthood as “dilemmas” (Gerson 2002) or “paradoxes” (Dermott 2008; Harrington et al. 2016). The broad public and scientific reception of Orna Donath’s work on “regretting motherhood” (2015, 2017), followed by numerous replication studies (for Germany, see Fischer 2016; Göbel 2016; Mundlos 2016), has evoked the impression that strong norms pertaining to parenthood make parents rather unhappy, and that this phenomenon predominantly affects women. However, Bernardi, Mynarska, and Rossier (2015) have shown that ambivalent feelings toward parenthood concern men, too. Indeed, fathers have also begun to express their fears and discontent (Henwood and Procter 2003; Moore and Abetz 2019).

Representative studies concerning the link between parenthood and life satisfaction yield contradictory findings. Even though parents reported greater life satisfaction after the birth of their first child in some studies (Aassve, Goisis, and Sironi 2012; Baetschmann, Staub, and Studer 2016; Kohler, Behrman, and Skytthe 2005), more studies found no changes in life satisfaction or even unfavorable outcomes in the long run—the so-called

parental happiness gap (for Germany, see Giesselmann, Hagen, and Schunck 2018; Grunow, Schulz, and Blossfeld 2012; Neuberger and Preisner 2018; Pollmann-Schult 2014). However, there has been little research on how this relationship has changed over the past decades (e.g., Herbst and Ifcher 2016), and how these changes are related to changing normative expectations toward mothers and fathers.

As we will outline in this article, parenthood norms are gendered; that is, the cultural conceptions of the duties of a “good father” are not congruent with the expectations toward a “good mother.” Moreover, they vary over time. Over the past decades, normative expectations have become less strict for women, but they have risen for fathers. However, how these changes are related to the changing relationship between parenthood and life satisfaction remains unknown. This article investigates these linkages and thereby contributes to the literature in two ways. First, we combine the theoretical approaches of utility maximization and constructivist gender theory to explain why and how parenthood effects on life satisfaction are sensitive to what we hereafter refer to as “gendered parenthood norms.” We assume that individuals make fertility decisions in order to maximize their personal life satisfaction. Such decisions are not only guided by economic considerations but also by social costs and benefits, such as stigmatization or social recognition for complying with predominant stereotypes. We thus argue that gendered parenthood norms moderate the effect of parenthood on life satisfaction, and that this effect differs for men and women. Second, we formulate two mechanisms, differentiating between intra- and interpersonal effects of parenthood, and test them empirically.

We thus take Donath’s (2015, 2017) observations as a starting point to study the relationship between gender, parenthood, and life satisfaction in Western Germany and to analyze how it has changed over time. Western Germany is a particularly suitable case study as it has experienced rapid change in gendered parenthood norms (see Cooke 2004; Grunow, Schulz, and Blossfeld 2012). The analyses draw on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP), using waves from 1984 to 2015. To fully identify how the link between parenthood and life satisfaction is connected to gendered parenthood norms and how it varies as they change, our analytical strategy encompasses a doubly longitudinal perspective. We first address intrapersonal change in life satisfaction due to parenthood and contrast these within effects with interpersonal differences obtained from a hybrid panel model. Second, we analyze trends in these effects over time and trace changing relationships between parenthood and life satisfaction back to normative change.

LIFE SATISFACTION AFTER THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD

Donath's (2015) qualitative study on "regretting motherhood" sparked a worldwide discussion and was followed by numerous replication studies. Most interviewees in these studies regretted their decision to become mothers and stated that, given the chance to turn back time, they would choose to remain childfree. They put forward two arguments to explain their feelings: they assumed that they would be better off today if they had remained childfree, and they argued that they had been pressured into motherhood by social norms and taboos (see also Moore and Abetz 2019). These arguments are consistent with two strands of literature explaining the link between parenthood and life satisfaction.

Resources, Parenthood, and Life Satisfaction

In the first strand of literature, parental life satisfaction is linked to the availability of resources, such as time and financial means (Pollmann-Schult 2014). Stanca (2009), for example, identified higher expenses and a loss of income as reasons for parental dissatisfaction. However, the effects of time and economic resources seem to be gender-specific (McQuillan et al. 2008). For mothers, employment reduces financial pressure and has been shown to increase life satisfaction (Preisner et al. 2018), while time pressure and financial hardship explain the reduced life satisfaction of single mothers (Myrskylä and Margolis 2014; Umberson, Pudrovska, and Reczek 2010). Whereas mothers are most satisfied working around 20 hours per week, fathers report the highest levels of life satisfaction when employed full-time (Schröder 2018). For men, economic resources seem to buffer stress associated with parenthood (Garcia 2012; Plantin, Månsson, and Kearney 2003).

With respect to change over time, two major developments are noteworthy in the case of Western Germany. First, maternal employment has increased over the last decades (BMFSFJ 2012), which is likely to have reduced income loss due to motherhood. Second, policy changes have facilitated the reconciliation of career and family and reduced financial strain. They include subsidies for formal preschool child care (Bauernschuster, Hener, and Rainer 2013) and a comprehensive parental leave legislation reform (Kreyenfeld and Hank 2000; Uunk, Kalmijn, and Muffels 2005). Although these policies are targeted at parents of both genders, they predominantly seem to affect women. For instance, the use of formal child care has been shown to positively affect the employment

and life satisfaction of mothers (Schober and Schmitt 2017; Schober and Stahl 2016), while most new fathers remain in full-time employment; a few of them have reduced work hours and increased child care engagement in recent years (Destatis 2016; Pollmann-Schult and Reynolds 2017), and only about a third have taken parental leave (BMFSFJ 2016; Reimer 2017).

Gendered Parenthood Norms

The second strand of literature focuses on the normative context of parenthood (i.e., the obligations, taboos, and expectations associated with motherhood and fatherhood). Social norms influence fertility in two ways. First, strong pro-natalist norms define parenthood as the quasi-natural standard. Hence, individuals may be pushed into parenthood against their will (Donath 2017). This phenomenon concerns women, in particular, because normative pressure to have children has been particularly strong for them. Empirically, it has been shown that childlessness is lower where strong and relatively uniform gender norms exist (Hudde 2018). However, recent research from Germany indicates a growing acceptance of child-free existences, particularly among urban and highly educated individuals (Bernardi, Mynarska, and Rossier 2015; Bujard 2015). Second, the relation between parenthood and life satisfaction is shaped by normative expectations regarding men's and women's involvement in various domains such as housework, child care, and employment (Moore and Abetz 2019; Stavrova and Fetchenhauer 2015; for Germany, see Grunow and Baur 2014; Lück 2006). The literature, both German and international, indicates that these expectations have developed differently for men and women and that new expectations have emerged for both (Lück 2006; Moore and Abetz 2019). In postwar Western Germany, social norms promoted a strong, gendered division of labor (Pfau-Effinger 2005). Since the turn of the millennium, however, many studies have indicated a change in attitudes about men's and women's involvement in paid work and child care (e.g., Hofmeister, Baur, and Röhler 2009; Kruse 2017).

Today, German mothers have better opportunities to pursue professional careers (Schober and Schmitt 2017). Whereas in the 1980s and 1990s employed mothers were called "*Rabenmütter*" (literally "raven mothers") and accused of selfishly advancing their careers at the expense of their children's well-being, maternal employment and children's enrollment in child care facilities are increasingly seen as beneficial for the child and are becoming socially accepted (Ciccia and Bleijenbergh 2014; Pfau-Effinger 2005; Zoch and Schober 2018). However, feminist scholars

agree that women have not yet been fully emancipated from normative prescriptions and the experience of discrimination (England 2010). For instance, with regard to wages, job security, and job quality, German women fare worse than men (Hofäcker 2006), and despite the rising acceptance of maternal employment, expectations regarding the quality of mothering have also risen (Hofmeister, Baur, and Röhler 2009). The ideal of “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996) entails an array of expectations, including the idea of the mother as primary caregiver who prioritizes her children over employment. Moreover, according to this ideal, appropriate mothering is time-, money-, and energy-consuming and emotionally draining because it is child-centered, need-driven, and expert-guided (Hays 1996, 8). As Hays (1996) noted, the logic behind these mothering demands stands at odds with the omnipresent market logic of utility maximization and growth—employed mothers face the challenge of coping with contradictory cultures and competing demands in their workplace, on the one hand, and their maternal engagement at home on the other (4). Musick, Meier, and Flood (2016) found that such multiple demands lead to higher levels of stress and dissatisfaction among mothers.

Cultural conceptions regarding the roles of mothers and fathers are inextricably linked (Hofmeister, Baur, and Röhler 2009). The recent shift toward fathers’ stronger involvement in their children’s upbringing was triggered by a change in gender roles for women. The “new father” is expected to take on a nurturing role and to be involved in parenting tasks (Dermott 2008; Gerson 2002; for Germany, see Grunow and Baur 2014; Kruse 2017). Even though there are country and class differences in the speed and scope of the diffusion of these emerging fatherhood norms, the direction is almost universal across Western countries (Kruse 2017; Plantin, Månsson, and Kearney 2003). As a consequence, today’s fathers are expected to be both financial providers and involved fathers (i.e., to provide “cash and care”) (Henwood and Procter 2003, 337). Moreover, men are increasingly expected to find true joy in fatherhood (340), as well as to publicly “talk” the discourse of gender equality and parental fulfillment (Plantin, Månsson, and Kearney 2003).

However, even though the ideal of engaged fatherhood has gained approval, the behavior of the “new father” is lagging behind (Dermott 2008, 16-17; for Germany, see Kassner 2008; Pollmann-Schult and Reynolds 2015), despite a growing desire among German fathers, for example, to reduce work hours (Pollmann-Schult and Reynolds 2015). There are various reasons for this. First, fathers face expectations that are difficult to meet (e.g., when their workplace does not grant them the time and flexibility to be involved in caregiving) (Garcia 2012). Second,

workplace cultures often reward fathers who are not involved in caregiving (Cantalini, Härkönen, and Dahlberg 2017) and may even discriminate against male employees engaging in child care (Coles, Hewitt, and Martin 2017; Garcia 2012). As a consequence, young fathers with egalitarian attitudes lack role models (Westering 2015). Lower levels of life satisfaction are reported by fathers who hold egalitarian ideals but do not live up to them (Harrington et al. 2016, 17), which indicates that the impact of these changing norms on life satisfaction is moderated by the difficulty of translating them into behavior.

Overall, the literature suggests that a fundamental shift in the relation between parenthood and life satisfaction has taken place as behavior, resources, and normative expectations have changed, and empirical evidence suggests that the effect of parenthood on life satisfaction is gendered. The following section lays the theoretical foundation for these assumptions.

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER NORMS ON LIFE SATISFACTION OF PARENTS AND NONPARENTS

Fertility Decisions and Their Consequences for Life Satisfaction

Most demographic and sociological literature assumes fertility behavior to be a series of utility-maximizing decisions based on expected costs and benefits of both parenthood and a childfree life (Friedman, Hechter, and Kanazawa 1994), whereby successful utility maximization should translate into greater life satisfaction. The costs and benefits may be associated with individual resources (e.g., income) or institutional settings (e.g., child care infrastructure), but may also entail social costs and benefits, such as stigmatization or social recognition as a consequence of complying with social norms. While there is ample literature on how costs influence the decision for or against having one or more children (Harknett, Billari, and Medalia 2014; Morgan and Berkowitz King 2001; Uunk, Kalmijn, and Muffels 2005) and, subsequently, life satisfaction, gendered parenthood norms are rarely brought into the equation.

To identify the influence of gendered parenthood norms on the life satisfaction of new mothers and fathers, we first need to address the role of social norms in fertility decisions (Bernardi, Mynarska, and Rossier 2015). Social norms influence fertility decisions in two ways (cf. Donath 2015, 207). First, they, too, affect the costs and benefits of parenthood through the value placed on parenthood and the subsequent status gains or

losses. Whereas conformity with the predominant ideal is usually rewarded with higher social status, nonconformity may be punished. Second, social norms reduce complexity and provide a framework for orientation, particularly in circumstances of uncertainty (Hechter and Kanazawa 1997). They substitute for missing information and serve as a compass when costs and benefits are hard to grasp. This applies to fertility decisions because they are complex, and the costs and benefits of one's future situation as a parent are difficult to predict. As a consequence, decisions that conform to the predominant norm may maximize utility even if they are economically irrational (Lück 2006, 407). Moreover, if a couple is faced with incongruent fertility intentions, negotiations and decisions tend to be based on gender role stereotypes (Cornelissen and Buschmeyer 2017; Hudde 2018).

Strong social norms, however, come with side effects. They nurture and reproduce taboos (Hechter and Opp 2001). For example, pro-natalist norms entail the taboo of expressing dissatisfaction with one's role as a parent and mourning one's loss of freedom after the transition to parenthood, which creates and sustains an overly positive public image of parenthood (Donath 2017; Moore and Abetz 2019). By silencing critical views of parenthood, taboos systematically bias information and conceal its "true" costs. Strong norms thus may bias the fertility decision toward (unwanted) parenthood and thereby contribute to lower parental life satisfaction.

Gender Constructivism

To explain how gendered parenthood norms come about and why they are so influential, we draw on the theoretical idea of "doing gender." Following West and Zimmerman (1987, 127), gender is an ascriptive status of a person that is reproduced in situational conduct. Gender may be displayed in small, spontaneous actions but also in repeated, institutionalized practices like housework and child care (Greenstein 2000), or hard work and overtime (West and Zimmerman 1987, 144). Such gender display reaffirms individuals' social status as gendered beings and strengthens their gender identity, which, in turn, benefits their well-being (Gerson 2002). Complying with gender stereotypes thus constitutes a means to increase life satisfaction. For women, parenthood plays an important role in a "complete" identity (Gillespie 2003), and cultural notions regarding typically feminine traits overlap with ideas of maternal behavior (Baur 2007). Masculinity, on the other hand, can be reproduced by behavior in

a broader range of spheres (e.g., sports or military; Baur 2007), but particularly in employment (Brandth and Kvande 1998). While childfree women thus risk stigmatization, childfree men bypass sanctions by focusing on their professional careers or declaring themselves “not ready for that responsibility” (Park 2002, 32).

As described above, the change in gender-specific parenthood norms in Germany has profoundly changed the social costs (e.g., sanctions) and benefits associated with the transition to parenthood. Overall, these changes appear to be partly at odds with gender stereotypes, demanding mothers to be economically productive and men to be nurturing and involved. Instead of being assigned to either breadwinning or home-making, both genders are now increasingly expected to engage in both fields of activity (Lück 2006). This has different, and sometimes ambivalent, implications for women and men. The decline of pro-natalism has benefited women more than men because they used to face greater stigmatization for childlessness. Moreover, increased freedom of choice regarding work–family arrangements has enabled mothers to engage in paid work and to (partly) escape unpaid and undervalued domestic tasks (England 2010). However, the challenge of juggling multiple demands and ideals has led to higher levels of stress (Gerson 2002; Hays 1996; Musick, Meier, and Flood 2016). For German fathers, the role set has been expanded from mere providers to provider-caregiver-all-rounders who are able to nurture and provide emotional support (Grunow and Baur 2014; Hofmeister, Baur, and Röhler 2009). Their socialization, however, might leave them ill prepared for these new tasks (Henwood and Procter 2003), and a lack of flexibility at the workplace may constitute another barrier to enacting these ideals (Coles, Hewitt, and Martin 2017; Garcia 2012; Grunow and Baur 2014).

Taken together, gendered parenthood norms define the social costs and rewards of fertility behavior and work–family arrangements. Following the integration of gendered parenthood norms into the rational choice approach, we formulate two mechanisms to explain how and why the transition to parenthood affects men’s and women’s life satisfaction differently today than it did three decades ago. First, normative change has translated into greater freedom in fertility decisions and fewer social sanctions for childlessness. Second, the erosion of taboos (also indicated by the debate about “regretting”) is gradually unveiling the “true” costs of parenthood and thereby reducing the risk of ill-informed decisions that may lower life satisfaction. We can thus derive the following four hypotheses:

With regard to women, we expect the greater freedom of choice and a less biased perception of the costs and benefits of motherhood to have two consequences: as gendered parenthood norms become more relaxed, we expect motherhood to become (more) conducive to life satisfaction (within effect) (*Hypothesis 1*), and the difference in life satisfaction between mothers and (voluntary and involuntary) childless women to decrease (between effect) (*Hypothesis 2*). In other words, intraindividually, the postpartum “slump” in life satisfaction should turn into a postpartum “bump,” while interindividually the levels of life satisfaction of mothers and nonmothers should converge.

With regard to men, rising normative expectations for fathers to engage in child care and to find this engagement fulfilling stand partly at odds with masculine stereotypes and actual opportunities to meet these expectations (e.g., at the workplace). As a result, we expect fatherhood to be less conducive to life satisfaction today than in previous decades (within effect) (*Hypothesis 3*). Furthermore, as the lives of fathers and childless men become increasingly different, we expect differences in life satisfaction to change, with fathers experiencing a decline relative to nonfathers (between effects) (*Hypothesis 4*). Briefly put, intraindividually, fatherhood should lower levels of life satisfaction, eroding the paternal happiness bump, while interindividually, the levels of life satisfaction of fathers and nonfathers should diverge, with fathers at a disadvantage.

METHODS

Recent studies have used panel data and fixed-effects models to estimate the intrapersonal effect of parenthood on life satisfaction (e.g., Berger 2013; Myrskylä and Margolis 2014). However, fixed-effects models do not allow for a comparison of treated and nontreated groups—in our case, parents and nonparents. Allison (2009) suggested estimating within and between effects in a random effects model with general least squares estimation—the so-called hybrid panel regression model (HPRM) (see also Brüderl 2010; Kaufman 1993; Schunck 2013).

Compared to ordinary least squares regressions, the variables in the HPRM undergo two transformations. The first transformation (between-transformation) eliminates all within-person variation over time by creating an individual constant (1). Higher (or lower) individual averages in the predictor variable \bar{x}_i are related (β_{between} in formula 1) to higher (or lower) individual averages in the outcome variable (\bar{y}_i). Accordingly, we

use the individual averages of all predictor variables to estimate between-person differences in life satisfaction in the HPRM. Moreover, the HPRM can also house time-constant predictors ($\beta_{\text{time constant}} c_i$).

$$\bar{y}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_{\text{between}} \bar{x}_i + \beta_{\text{time constant}} c_i + \mu_i + \bar{\epsilon}_i \quad (1)$$

The second transformation, the within-transformation, focuses on within-person variation over time (2). At each observed point in time, individuals may report values above or below their individual average. Hence, in formula 2, β_{within} relates deviations from an individual’s average in the predictor variable ($x_{it} - \bar{x}_i$) to deviations in the outcome variable ($y_{it} - \bar{y}_i$).

$$(y_{it} - \bar{y}_i) = \beta_{\text{within}} (x_{it} - \bar{x}_i) + (\epsilon_{it} - \bar{\epsilon}_i) \quad (2)$$

The HPRM (3) now accommodates within and between predictors from both transformations—first, the individual average (\bar{x}_i), and second, the time-specific deviations from this individual average ($x_{it} - \bar{x}_i$). In addition to the individual fixed effect μ_i from formula 1, we further include γ_t as a time fixed effect to control for general time trends in formula 3.

$$y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_{\text{within}} (x_{it} - \bar{x}_i) + \beta_{\text{time constant}} c_i + \beta_{\text{between}} \bar{x}_i + \gamma_t + \mu_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

To analyze changes of within effects and between effects over time, we estimate HPRMs covering a time span of seven years each and repeat this procedure for every survey year. We thus analyze the German Socio-Economic Panel from 1984 to 2015 in a series of 25 overlapping seven-year panels centered around one core year each (1987-2012). For instance, the first HPRM for 1987 includes all observations of women aged 16 to 55 and all of men aged 16 to 55 from 1984 to 1990, the model for 1988 includes all respective observations from 1985 to 1991, and the model for 2012 includes all respective observations from 2009 to 2015. As each HPRM covers a time span of seven years, the within effects are estimated for women and men with children of up to six years of age compared to their lives up to six years before the transition to parenthood. To estimate

the HPRM, all predictors are transformed to a demeaned variable to estimate the within effect and a mean constant variable to estimate the between effect separately for each seven-year panel (see Preisner et al. 2018). Finally, we plot the within and between effects derived from the HPRMs over time and correlate the respective effects with parenthood norms.

The new approach of time-traveling HPRM models has a compelling advantage. As we estimate separate models for each year, we do not assume effects of parenthood and other predictors to be constant from the 1980s to the 2010s. Because our models move forward in time, our overlapping seven-year panels allow us to model long-term social change. The within coefficients of the HPRM can be interpreted as the average change in life satisfaction taking place when a person changes from being childless to being a parent of a preschooler. The between coefficients can be interpreted as the mean difference between all nonparent observations (person-years) compared to all parent observations. While the former do not estimate any level effects or contain endogeneity bias, the latter may include constant or time-varying selection effects. We thus additionally estimate Oaxaca-Blinder decompositions, which allow us to identify self-selection into motherhood and fatherhood based on socioeconomic resources. As our findings show, self-selection increases for women over the period under study and remains rather constant for men. (The results are available from the authors on request.)

We use the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) (Schupp et al. 2015), analyzing the waves from 1984 to 2015 and focusing on women and men in Western Germany in their fertile years. We have excluded Eastern Germany since it was not part of the GSOEP until 1991 and because there were not enough observations (births) to calculate reliable separate models for this region. Our final sample comprises 18,397 women aged 16 to 55, of whom 1,941 have transitioned to motherhood, and 11,896 men aged 16 to 55, of whom 1,534 have transitioned to fatherhood. Overall, we analyze 246,048 person-year observations; 139,581 for women and 106,467 for men, 100,043 nonparent-years and 146,005 parent-years.

Parenthood affects various realms of life, and it may increase satisfaction in one of them while reducing it in another. However, since the focus of our paper lies on the overall effect of parenthood, we use *satisfaction with life in general* as our dependent variable. GSOEP respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with life in general on a scale from 0 (“completely dissatisfied”) to 10 (“completely satisfied”). For our analyses, the 11-point scale is treated as a continuous variable.

Our main variable at the individual level is *parenthood* (i.e., the existence of biological children aged 0 to 6). We thereby differentiate between

parents of preschool children and childless individuals. Individuals with children older than 6 were excluded from the analysis. At the contextual level, our main variable is the *parenthood norm*. It is based on the item “It is much better for everyone concerned if the man goes to work and the woman stays at home looking after the house and children,” included in the German General Social Survey (GESIS-Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften 2016) in 1982, 1991, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012, which could be answered on a four-point scale ranging from “totally agree” to “totally disagree.” Our measurement takes the percentage of women aged 16 to 55 and men aged 16 to 55 who (rather or totally) disagree with the above statement. Missing years were interpolated: since the percentage of women and men who disagree with the statement increases steadily, we include year and year-squared as predictors in the regression models to estimate values for the years not covered by the survey. (See Tables A9 and A10 in the online appendix for weighted descriptive statistics for all variables.)

Control variables were carefully selected on the basis of previous research on the relationship between parenthood and life satisfaction in Germany (Myrskylä and Margolis 2014; Pollmann-Schult 2014; Preisner et al. 2018; Schröder 2018; Stanca 2009). They match at least one of the following criteria: first, the factor is relevant for the life satisfaction of parents and nonparents; second, it is unequally distributed between German parents and nonparents, as well as between women and men; and/or third, a change has occurred in these resources over the last decades. Included in the models are the following variables: *partnership*, *age*, *years of education*, inflation-adjusted post-government equivalent *income* in Euros (deflated, natural logarithm), *employment status* (six categories: full-time, part-time, mini job, unemployed, homemaker, in education/vocational training), and *migration background* (respondent and/or her/his parents were not born in Germany). To check the robustness of our results, we also estimate models that additionally control for occupational status. (The results are available from the authors upon request.)

PARENTHOOD NORMS, PARENTHOOD EFFECTS, AND LIFE SATISFACTION

Figure 1 displays the development of life satisfaction of women and men with and without children over time. In absolute terms, life satisfaction declined from the mid-1980s onwards for all groups and has been on the rise again since 2004, particularly for parents. When comparing mothers

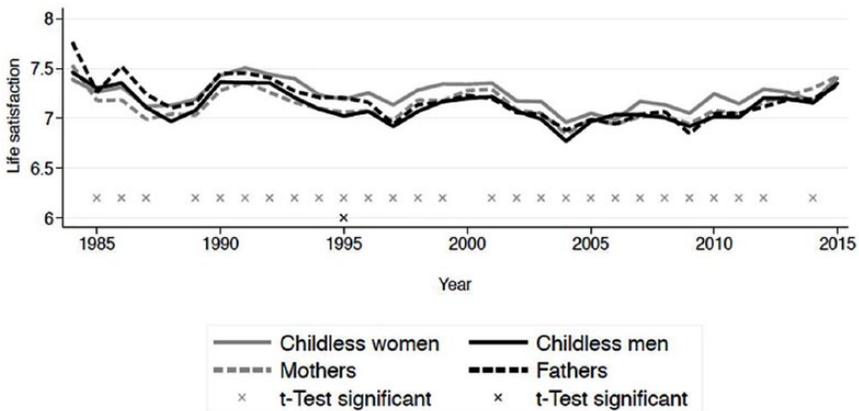


FIGURE 1: Parenthood and life satisfaction in Western Germany, 1984-2015
 Data: German Socio-Economic Panel, release v.321, own calculations. Sample includes women aged 16-55, $n=18,397$, observed in 139,581 person-years, and men aged 16-55, $n=11,896$, observed in 106,467 person-years. Mean life satisfaction per year.

(dashed gray line) with nonmothers (solid gray line), we find mothers to have reported significantly lower life satisfaction in 14 out of 31 years (gray “x”). Only recently, in 2014, have mothers reported significantly higher life satisfaction than nonmothers. Regarding men, we find almost no significant differences in life satisfaction (black “x”) between fathers (dashed black line) and nonfathers (solid black line). Life satisfaction has increased for all men (i.e., fathers and nonfathers) in recent years.

Figure 2 illustrates the extent to which parenthood norms have changed between 1987 and 2012. We observe a substantial increase in disagreement with strongly gendered parenthood roles. Whereas in 1987, 50 percent of respondents disagreed with the strictly gendered male breadwinner/female homemaker model, disagreement reached 80 percent in 2012.

Multivariate Findings

We now turn to the relationships between parenthood and life satisfaction (i.e., the coefficients from the time-traveling HPRMs) (see Tables A1 to A8 in the online appendix for all estimates). In the following, we present the within and between effects both over time (Figures 3 and 4) and over gendered parenthood norms (correlations coefficients, Table 1).

Figure 3 displays the within effects for women (gray lines) and men (black lines), and their respective areas of significance (thin lines). In

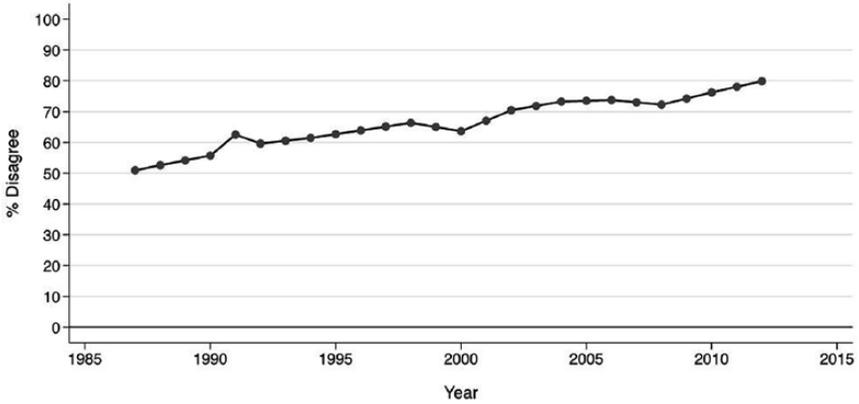


FIGURE 2: Trend in Gendered Parenthood Norms in Western Germany, 1987-2012

Macro Indicator: “It is much better for everyone involved if the man is fully at work and the woman stays at home and takes care of the household and the children” (disagree %). Data: German General Social Survey (ALLBUS), n=9,913.

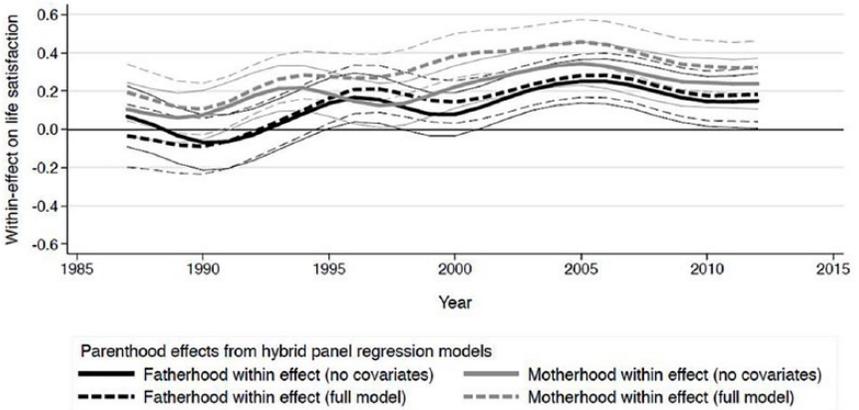


FIGURE 3: HPRM Within Effects of Parenthood on Life Satisfaction in Western Germany

Data: German Socio-Economic Panel, release v.321, own calculations. Sample includes women aged 16 to 55, n=18,397, observed in 139,581 person-years, and men aged 16 to 55, n=11,896, observed in 106,467 person-years. Linear hybrid panel regression models for year X and 3 previous and 3 subsequent years. Unstandardized coefficients. Thin lines represent 95% confidence intervals of the regression coefficients.

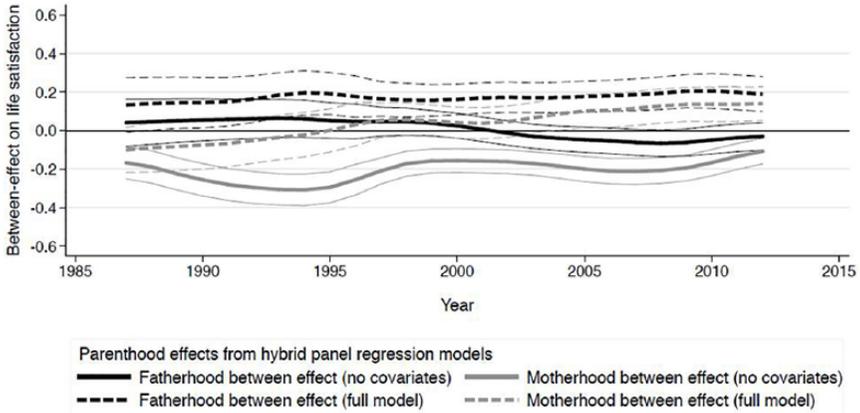


FIGURE 4: HPRM Between Effects of Parenthood on Life Satisfaction in Western Germany

Data: German Socio-Economic Panel, release v.32l, own calculations. Sample includes women aged 16 to 55, n=18,397, observed in 139,581 person-years, and men aged 16 to 55, n=11,896, observed in 106,467 person-years. Linear hybrid panel regression models for year X and 3 previous and 3 subsequent years. Unstandardized coefficients. Thin lines represent 95% confidence intervals of the regression coefficients.

TABLE 1: Correlations between Parenthood Effects and Gendered Parenthood Norm in Western Germany

| | <i>Mother should stay home, father should work (% disagree)</i> |
|---|---|
| Motherhood within effect (no covariates) | 0.710 *** |
| Motherhood within effect (full model) | 0.690 *** |
| Motherhood between effect (no covariates) | 0.409 * |
| Motherhood between effect (full model) | 0.938 *** |
| Fatherhood within effect (no covariates) | 0.663 *** |
| Fatherhood within effect (full model) | 0.778 *** |
| Fatherhood between effect (no covariates) | -0.817 *** |
| Fatherhood between effect (full model) | 0.590 * |

Data: German Socio-Economic Panel, release v.32l, own calculations. Correlations between parenthood effects (coefficients see online Appendix Tables A1-A8) and gendered parenthood norm. Own calculations, n=26 years, separate calculations for each row in table.

* $p < .05$.
 ** $p < .01$.
 *** $p < .001$.

accordance with *Hypothesis 1*, we find the within effect of motherhood to have increased over time and along changing gendered parenthood norms, albeit not in a perfectly linear fashion. The solid gray line represents the

effect from the models without control variables (i.e., the average overall effect the transition to motherhood has on the life satisfaction of women—including all changes that might come with this transition, such as changes in financial resources or employment). The dashed line represents the models with controls (i.e., the average effect of the transition to motherhood when all controls remain constant). A comparison of the two models indicates that motherhood itself has the potential to increase women's life satisfaction, but its positive influence is dampened by the various challenges that accompany it (solid lines remain below dashed lines). We find strong positive correlations between the within effects and disagreement with the strictly gendered parenthood norm (motherhood within effect [no covariates]: $r=0.710$; motherhood within effect [full model]: $r=0.690$; see Table 1).

We find a similar trend for men (black lines). These results stand in contrast to hypothesis 3, which assumed a decreasing positive effect of fatherhood on life satisfaction due to multiple new expectations. Instead, the transition to fatherhood exerts an increasing positive effect on life satisfaction as disagreement with strictly gendered parenthood norms grows. This is true for both the full model (fatherhood within effect [full model], $r=0.778$) and the model without covariates (fatherhood within effect [no covariates], $r=0.663$) and remains significant after the mid-1990s and 2001, respectively.

Figure 4 shows the trend of the between effects over time. With respect to women, the results support hypothesis 2. Over the years, as strictly gendered parenthood norms lose support, the difference in life satisfaction between mothers and nonmothers diminishes, and—in the last years under study—becomes insignificant (solid gray line). When comparing mothers and childless women with the same characteristics (i.e., controlling for socioeconomic resources; dashed gray line), mothers' life satisfaction becomes higher than nonmothers' during the mid-1990s and further increases in the 2000s and 2010s as gendered parenthood norms continue to lose ground (motherhood between effect [full model], $r=0.938$; Table 1).

Turning to men, we find only partial support for hypothesis 4, which predicted emerging expectations toward fathers and the challenges associated therewith to gradually lead to lower life satisfaction. Regarding mean differences without controls (solid black line), in the 1980s and 1990s fathers do report somewhat higher, and in the 2010s somewhat lower, life satisfaction than childless men, but these effects are not significant. Nevertheless, without controls, the trend is in favor of childless men, and we find the between effect to be negatively correlated with weaker gendered parenthood norms (fatherhood between effect (no covariates), $r = -0.817$; see Table 1). However, when comparing fathers and nonfathers

with the same socioeconomic resources and demographic characteristics (dashed black line), the direction of the effect reverses: all else being equal, fathers rank above childless men in terms of life satisfaction, and the size and significance of this effect increases slightly in the last years under study (fatherhood between effect [full model], $r=0.590$).

To check for the robustness of our results, we tested the parenthood effect for parents with children up to 5 and up to 9 years of age and by number of children. The results are strikingly robust (see Figures A1 to A6 in the online Appendix).

CONCLUSION

This is, to our knowledge, the first attempt to investigate long-term trends in the effect of parenthood on life satisfaction on the basis of large-scale representative data, and to explain these trends with changes in social norms. The article contributes to the theoretical discussion by integrating the ideas of utility maximization and constructivist gender theory. We theorize that decisions for or against parenthood are taken with regard to gendered social norms in order to increase life satisfaction. In brief, we propose two mechanisms through which gendered norms pertaining to parenthood influence life satisfaction for mothers and fathers. First, we argue that weakening gendered parenthood norms provide a more liberal social climate, allowing individuals to make better-informed fertility decisions according to their wishes. This should be conducive to life satisfaction for both parents and nonparents. Second, we argue that the rise of egalitarian norms enables parents to choose more freely among work–family arrangements, which should close the happiness gap after the transition to parenthood.

The empirical study yields several new and insightful findings. As normative expectations for motherhood and fatherhood have converged and life courses of mothers and fathers have become more similar, both women and men increasingly benefit from parenthood in terms of life satisfaction. Today, women and men in Western Germany, both with and without children, all report very similar levels of life satisfaction. The decline of conventional parenthood norms has, however, affected life satisfaction more strongly for mothers than for fathers. With the erosion of taboos, the costs of the decision for or against motherhood have decreased. This has enhanced life satisfaction for mothers and, to a lesser degree, nonmothers and thus closed the maternal happiness gap. In contrast, the

differences between fathers and childless men are less pronounced. The trend is to the disadvantage of fathers and can be explained with increasing socioeconomic differences between both groups. Regarding intrapersonal differences, we expected “new” fatherhood to be accompanied by greater obligations and duties, and, therefore, lower life satisfaction. Contrary to our expectations, we find evidence that fathers, too, benefit from the modernization of gender norms in terms of life satisfaction. There are several explanations for this finding. First, fathers’ behavior is lagging behind the increasingly egalitarian attitudes (BMFSFJ 2016; Reimer 2017). Second, fathers tend to take over leisure-oriented child care tasks (Carlson, Hanson, and Fitzroy 2016), while mothers engage in routine tasks that they perceive as stressful (Hays 1996; Musick, Meier, and Flood 2016). Finally, fathers who live up to the new expectations might experience public recognition and reward for their engagement.

As in every study, there are some limitations. First, while we were able to separate our arguments and analyses by gender, we had to rely on one single indicator for parenthood norms. Though it encompasses normative expectations for both mothers and fathers, we cannot distinguish between expectations pertaining to the role of fathers and that of mothers. It would be particularly useful to measure the exact “duties” and the degree of involvement that are expected of fathers. However, to our knowledge, there is no such measurement that spans a period of several decades. Second, although our indicator exhibited a considerable co-trend with changing parenthood effects, the statistical association constitutes a correlation at the macro level, and changing gendered parenthood norms may co-occur with other developments, such as increases in female employment and the acceptance and use of formal child care (Bernardi, Mynarska, and Rossier 2015; Pfau-Effinger 2005). If these indicators, too, were available over a longer time span, they could be used to disentangle these effects. Finally, though GSOEP is a rich data set with many respondents, not enough transitions to parenthood have been observed to conduct separate analyses for nonstandard family arrangements, or for East Germany.

Nevertheless, we are confident that our approach makes a valuable contribution both theoretically, by integrating constructivist gender theory and utility maximization, and empirically, by separating intra- and interpersonal effects of parenthood on life satisfaction modeling trends in these effects, and finally, by tracing these back to normative change. These long-term trends have implications for policy making. As mothers are catching up with fathers in terms of employment and fertility rates remain stagnant, facilitating the reconciliation of parenthood and professional careers (for both genders) and

relieving the financial burden on young families remain important points on the political agenda. As our study shows, institutional change in the domain of family policy needs to be in line with the normative environment in order to successfully promote the well-being of mothers and fathers.

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