Do children enhance subjective wellbeing? A Factorial Survey Study of couple-level and contextual factors in Italy

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Working paper prepared for EPC 2026

Abstract

Fertility desires are often difficult to reconcile with the pursuit of other life goals that matter for subjective wellbeing (SWB). This is especially true in low fertility contexts, such as Italy, where the direct and indirect costs of children are high due to precarious working conditions and a familistic welfare system. To understand how children are perceived to affect wellbeing, we implement a Factorial Survey Experiment on a sample of 6,000 Italian women and men aged 25-49. Respondents have been asked to judge the life satisfaction of fictitious partners in a different-sex couple without and with one or two children, under different socioeconomic and contextual circumstances that are expected to affect the perceived SWB. Results show that the perceived wellbeing associated with children varies by gender. While children bring a small wellbeing premium to men, they are perceived to bring a wellbeing penalty to women. The observed gap in wellbeing between the scenarios with and without children is reduced for women in the following cases: when she has access to flexible work, when unpaid work is equally divided, and when family policies are generous. Results suggest that the division of paid and unpaid work and its repercussion on wellbeing vary according to the fictitious partners' gender. Additional analyses including respondents' characteristics reveal that negative evaluations of mothers' wellbeing are partly driven by women and by childless respondents.

Keywords: Factorial Survey Experiment, fertility, Italy, parenthood; subjective well-being.

1. Introduction

The idea that children positively contribute to subjective wellbeing (SWB) has been questioned by a large body of research (Aassve et al., 2012; Kohler et al., 2005; Kohler & Mencarini, 2016; Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011). Evidence indicates that the link between children and parental SWB can vary substantially depending on the age of the child and of the parents, the socio-economic background, parental attitudes, or the country context (Balbo & Arpino, 2016; Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011). However, this body of literature has rarely engaged with the issue of whether children are regarded as improving SWB, regardless of one's own reproductive history. In other terms, little is known about the way in which contemporary young adults conceptualize parenthood.

In modern societies, the desirability of children is grounded in the belief that children increase the wellbeing of parents (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011). Children are regarded as a source of non-substitutable pleasure and of social capital: the birth of a child is expected to strengthen affective relationships and bonds with family and friends (Schoen et al., 1997). Because childbearing in Western countries is mostly planned, the decision-making process underlying childbearing involves several tradeoffs between children and the pursuit of other life goals that contribute to individuals' SWB. Competing life goals envisioned e.g., by the Second Demographic Transition Theory include the desire to invest in one's own career, or to have sufficient leisure time. Over the last decades, the indirect or opportunity costs of having a child have increased, especially among employed women; the direct cost of raising a child may have also become more substantial, as indicated by research on the United States (Kornrich & Furstenberg, 2013). As a result, the age at first child has been steadily increasing, together with the income prerequisites of parenthood (van Wijk & Billari, 2024). While childlessness has become more socially accepted (Merz & Liefbroer, 2012), the two-child family ideal persists among women in Europe (Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014), suggesting that parenthood may still represent an important life goal.

The social desirability of children is particularly worth investigating in the Italian context. The Italian welfare state is familistic and women are those who need to make the greatest compromises between children and their employment opportunities (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022); young adults' labour market prospects have been deteriorating over the last decades and economic independence is difficult to achieve; still, Italian women's fertility desires are in line with their European counterparts (Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014), with 60% of adolescents indicating a preference for two children (ISTAT, 2024). Against this background, understanding whether and how children are perceived to improve SWB in a low-fertility context like Italy is crucial as it can shed light on the childbearing decision-making process and, possibly, on the factors that are perceived as obstacles to having children.

Because the SWB associated with childbearing depends on the tradeoffs that individuals are willing to make, couple-level and contextual factors need to be properly considered. We address this research question by employing an experimental setting. Studies adopting an experimental design to the study of fertility (Aassve, Adserà, et al., 2024; Behrman et al., 2025; Guetto et al., 2025; Karabchuk et al., 2022; Lappegård et al., 2022; Vignoli et al., 2022; Wang & Dong, 2024) aim at manipulating the conditions under which respondents are asked their fertility preferences in order to downplay the influence of individual-specific considerations and make respondents focus on the

stylized scenarios presented by researchers. Respondents are asked to evaluate how many children a fictitious couple would have (Karabchuk et al., 2022), to rate their own fertility intentions under a future economic scenario (Lappegård et al., 2022; Vignoli et al., 2022; Wang & Dong, 2024), or to rate how successful or preferable a given family is (Aassve, Adserà, et al., 2024; Behrman et al., 2025). Notably, only a minority of these studies compare scenarios with and without children (Aassve, Adserà, et al., 2024; Behrman et al., 2025), and none of them assess the link between children and SWB, despite its relevance for childbearing decisions. Also, previous studies using an experimental design rarely considered partners within a couple separately, thereby allowing to explore gender differences.

Parenthood may indeed affect differently women's and men's subjective wellbeing. In all Western countries, normative expectations surrounding motherhood are persistent and prevail over fatherhood expectations: women face high social pressures to become mothers, and mothers are required to provide their children with the best possible care, combining paid and unpaid work (Schmidt et al., 2023). Also, mothers take responsibilities for much of the mental activities related to family logistics – the so called *mental load*, with negative repercussions on stress and wellbeing (Daminger, 2019). In Italy, where women have long been considered the main caregivers (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022) and female employment remains comparatively low, the idea that children are more important for women's self-realization compared to men might be deeply-rooted. Also, Italian women tend to conceptualize motherhood as a pervasive, all-consuming experience (Lebano & Jamieson, 2020).

Building on the existing literature, this paper uses a Factorial Survey Experiment (FSE) that has been administered to 6,000 women and men aged 25-49 living in Italy. Respondents have been asked to judge the life satisfaction of fictitious partners in a different-sex couple without and with one or two children, under different socioeconomic and contextual circumstances that are expected to affect the perceived SWB associated with children. Because women and men have different roles in a couple, especially after childbirth, the life satisfaction of the female and male partner has been asked separately. Such a FSE allows to identify and clearly disentangle the factors that shape the association between SWB and the presence and number of children, thereby enabling to understand how the perceived wellbeing associated with children varies under different scenarios, for men and women. By providing insights on perceptions of childbearing, we contribute to the literature on SWB and childbearing, as well as to the broader debate about low fertility in Italy and in the European context. Particularly, our findings shed light on the gendered dimension of parenthood (Lebano & Jamieson, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2023).

2. Data and methods

2.1 Design of the Factorial Survey Experiment

Primary data has been collected on a representative sample of 6,009 women and men aged 25-49 living in Italy. The data collection took place between April and May 2025 and was conducted online by the Italian survey company SWG S.p.A, an established company in the field of market and opinion research. Respondents belong to an online panel owned by the survey company, which has been largely used for research purposes. A quota sampling ensures that the population is adequately

represented according to age group, gender, geographical region, education, employment, and marital status. A questionnaire and a Factorial Survey Experiment (FSE) have been administered to respondents.

To evaluate how children are perceived to affect SWB, and how this perception varies across a range of interconnected factors, respondents have been asked to judge fictional situations (i.e., vignettes) representing scenarios with varying couple and contextual characteristics (i.e., dimensions) that vary randomly across respondents. The dimensions and the levels of the vignettes are illustrated in detail in Table 1 below. The fixed characteristics of the co-residential couple, not varying across vignettes, are the couple's distance from their parents, their health condition, and their economic situation (see an example of the vignette in Figure 1). Our outcome of interest is respondents' perception of partners' wellbeing, measured on a scale from 0 to 10 by asking: "Based on the information provided, how satisfied with his/her life do you think he/she is?". Because some dimensions might be evaluated as more relevant for the fictitious woman than for the man, we pose separate questions about the male and the female partner's life satisfaction.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

As shown in Table 1, our FSE effectively consists of two separate experiments, the first including only vignettes in which the couple has no children, thus treating the number of children as a fixed dimension, and excluding the second set of dimensions (i.e., family policy packages). Conversely, the second experiment includes vignettes in which the fictitious couple has either one or two children. Financial transfers and childcare services, in fact, do not constitute plausible dimensions of the first experiment – they would not affect the partners' wellbeing in the absence of children –, but they do represent key dimensions of the second. To ensure that respondents are equally exposed to vignettes with and without children, we present four vignettes to each respondent, two with children – either one or two – and two without. Within each category (with and without children), the vignettes are fully randomized. The total number of observations, i.e., the vignettes evaluated by respondents, is 24,036.

Compared to alternative direct-questioning techniques, FSE allow to reduce the social desirability bias that could arise when assessing couples' wellbeing (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). Also, referring to a fictitious couple enables respondents to evaluate counterfactual scenarios in a more plausible way and to focus on the elements presented in the vignettes, not referring to their own personal situation and thereby limiting the influence of unmeasurable factors. Thanks to the design of FSEs, the outcomes can be causally related to the manipulation of vignette dimensions and levels. Vignettes are well suited to answer questions with a multidimensional nature, such as the desirability of children, and allow to uncover perceptions and values.

2.2 Measures

The aim of vignettes is to present realistic scenarios that respondents can evaluate, avoiding boredom and fatigue effects. Therefore, the number of dimensions and of levels (i.e., the values that a dimension can take on) should be minimised in order to test the research hypotheses; a vignette with seven dimensions represents a mid-level of complexity (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). Because our

experiment differs according to the presence of children of the fictitious couple, the first experiment – with no children – has four dimensions, while the second – with children – has seven dimensions (see Table 1). The vignette universe, indicating the number of possible vignette combinations presented to respondents, amounts to 432.

The fictitious couple, Anna and Leonardo, has varying demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Compared to previous studies adopting FSEs to study fertility (Aassve, Adserà, et al., 2024; Guetto et al., 2025; Karabchuk et al., 2022; Wang & Dong, 2024), we introduce new dimensions: we let the presence and number of children vary, together with the age of the partners; we add the housing dimension, and we furthermore consider the aspect of work flexibility in addition to employment status. The couple can have, respectively: (a) no children; (b) one child aged 6; (c) two children aged 4 and 6. The age of the fictitious partners has been chosen in accordance with the family formation patterns prevailing in Italy. In every age bracket, Anna is 2 years younger than Leonardo, resulting in three categories: (a) He is 29 years old, she is 27 years old; (b) He is 37, she is 35; (c) He is 42, she is 40. Housing varies between (a) owner-occupied and (b) rented. We furthermore aggregated employment status and work flexibility in a single item. This item also includes the male-breadwinner-female-homemaker scenario, because this configuration is common in the Italian context, especially after the transition to parenthood (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022). This results in four categories: (a) He can organise his working hours autonomously, while she cannot; (b) He cannot organise his working hours autonomously, while she can; (c) He and she cannot organise their working hours autonomously; (d) He works, she does not.

Also, we include standard measures of work-family reconciliation, such as the division of domestic work and childcare, dichotomously distinguished between an unequal arrangement where she does most of the unpaid work and an equal division. In the vignettes characterised by the presence of children, family policies can also vary. We decided to focus on school services and financial transfers. School services are operationalized with the closing time of primary and lower secondary schools in the municipality of residence, varying between two levels: (a) they close at 12.30 a.m.; (b) they close at 4:30 p.m. Finally, two options are considered regarding child benefits: (a) For each child, families receive 50 euros per month; and (b) For each child, families receive 200 euros per month. This choice was based on the range of variation of the newly introduced allowance for children, amounting to 50 euros per month in high-income households and 200 euros in low-income households, respectively (Dalla-Zuanna & McDonald, 2023).

2.3 Analytical strategy

Random-effects regression models are implemented to properly take into account the hierarchical data structure (i.e., respondents evaluating multiple vignettes). The dependent variable, measured on a scale from 0 to 10, is the respondents' assessment of the fictitious partners' life satisfaction and the independent variables are the vignette dimensions. Because we expect that the evaluation of life satisfaction highly varies between respondents, we use random intercept models. Separate models are run by the fictitious partner's gender and by the presence of children. Since subjective wellbeing can be considered a continuous variable, we estimate four multilevel linear regression models: two for the vignettes with children, including the family policies dimensions, and two for the vignettes without children.

To test whether the association between children and subjective wellbeing depends on couple-level and contextual circumstances, vignettes with and without children should be compared. To this aim, we retrieve predicted values of life satisfaction by couple dimensions (in the vignettes without children) and predicted values of life satisfaction by the number of children and couple-level or contextual dimensions (in the vignettes with children). Also, we evaluate heterogeneous responses to the vignettes by respondents' demographic characteristics: gender and parenthood status.

3. Results

Thanks to the use of quotas, our sample well represents the overall Italian population in the age range 25-49 in terms of education, employment and marital status, and region of residence. The mean age of respondents is 38. In terms of educational attainment, 28% of respondents are highly educated, while respondents with a medium level of education (i.e., with a high school diploma) represent 40% of the sample. Most of respondents are employed, although with considerable gender differences: while 85% of men are employed, only 65% of women are, with inactive individuals most represented among women (19% vs. 5% of men). 7% of respondents are students. Half of respondents are childless; the majority is in a romantic relationship, with 63% of them being in a cohabiting relationship and 14% in a non-cohabiting relationship. The proportion of single individuals is slightly higher among men than women (24% vs. 20%).

To evaluate how the presence and number of children is perceived to affect life satisfaction, we first calculate the average life satisfaction associated with having zero, one, and two children, by the fictitious partner's gender. It should be noted that the average life satisfaction associated with having one or two children is calculated on half of the possible vignettes (N=12,018), while the life satisfaction associated with having zero children is calculated on the remaining half (N=12,018). Thanks to the design of the FSE, all other dimensions are randomly distributed. Results are presented in Figure 2.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

For Leonardo, having one child is perceived to bring a small wellbeing premium compared to the situation in which he has no children: his predicted life satisfaction equals 6.75 (CI: 6.69; 6.79) with one child vs. 6.64 (CI: 6.60; 6.68) with no children. Having two children is associated with a life satisfaction that is comparable to having no children (coeff = 6.67, CI: 6.20; 6.72). Conversely, for Anna having either one or two children is perceived to bring a wellbeing penalty compared to the situation in which she has no children. Her predicted life satisfaction with no children equals 6.63, going down to 6.27 with one child and 6.18 with two children. In sum, Leonardo's and Anna's average life satisfaction without children is identical, while children are perceived to worsen Anna's – but not Leonardo's – wellbeing.

3.1 Subjective wellbeing by gender of fictitious partners, couple-level and contextual characteristics

We first estimate our four baseline models: one model on the vignettes with children, separately by the fictitious partner's gender (Table 2), and one model on the vignettes without children, separately by gender (Table 3).

[INSERT TABLES 2, 3 HERE]

The life satisfaction of the fictitious partners highly varies according to couple-level and contextual characteristics and to the presence of children. Particularly, in the model based on the vignettes where the fictitious couple has children (Table 2), the following couple dimensions emerge to positively affect Anna's life satisfaction: being homeowner (coeff = 0.38), Anna's flexible work (coeff = 0.47), equally dividing housework and childcare (coeff = 0.59). The contextual dimensions, i.e., family policies, have also a positive effect on Anna's life satisfaction: receiving a monthly transfer of €200 per month has been evaluated as increasing Anna's wellbeing more than having full-time schooling for their child(ren). Leonardo's life satisfaction has also been perceived to increase when the couple is homeowner (coeff = 0.45), when he has access to flexible work arrangements (coeff = 0.58), and in presence of generous family policies. Nevertheless, some couple dimensions appear to be gendered. In the case where only Leonardo is employed, his life satisfaction has been rated to increase slightly compared to the reference category (i.e., both having no access to flexible work), while the division of housework and childcare does not affect Leonardo's wellbeing.

To test whether the life satisfaction associated with the vignette dimensions varies according to the number of children, several interaction terms are introduced separately in the models with children. The interaction terms (couple dimension # one vs. two children) are not statistically significant and do not improve the model fit compared to the same models without interactions. Because it is not possible to interact each dimension with the category "no children", predicted values of life satisfaction by couple-level and contextual characteristics are compared to the same effects in the models without children. Selected results are illustrated in Figure 3 (a-b). In line with the finding that children are perceived to bring a wellbeing penalty for Anna, we observe remarkable gender differences in the effects of couple-level attributes on life satisfaction by presence of children.

[INSERT FIGURE 3a-b HERE]

Some interesting patterns can be noted regarding the effects of employment status and flexibility (Figure 3a). When only Anna has access to flexible work, she is equally satisfied with and without children; when only Leonardo has access to flexible work, he is more satisfied with children than when he is childless. Conversely, not having access to flexible work for both partners is perceived to worsen Anna's life satisfaction when the couple has children compared to being childless, but not Leonardo's. The male-breadwinner arrangement is associated with the lowest wellbeing for both partners when the couple is childless. When the fictitious couple has children, being the sole earner positively affects Leonardo's life satisfaction compared to the same situation without children. For Anna, the effect goes in the opposite direction: not being employed and having children brings a wellbeing penalty compared to not being employed without children.

Similarly, the division of housework and childcare (Figure 3b) has been interpreted in gendered terms. When unpaid work is mostly done by Anna, Leonardo's life satisfaction is rated to be higher with children than without; conversely, in the same situation, Anna's life satisfaction has been rated to be substantially lower with children than without. When unpaid work is equally divided, Anna's life satisfaction is highest (both with and without children), while, in presence of children, Leonardo's satisfaction does not differ between the two arrangements (equal or unequal division of

unpaid work). We also note that, for Anna, the gap in terms of life satisfaction between the childless scenario and the scenario with children gets smaller when unpaid work is equally divided.

A clear positive association between homeownership and wellbeing (Figure 1A, Appendix), of about 0.4 points (see Tables 2 and 3), emerges instead for both Anna and Leonardo, in both situations (with and without children). For Leonardo, owning a house always brings a wellbeing premium compared to renting; nevertheless, having children and being homeowner is indistinguishable in terms of wellbeing from being childless and being homeowner. For Anna, owning a house and having kids is perceived to worsen her life satisfaction compared to the same housing situation without kids; the same can be concluded for rent. It can be noted that, for Anna, being homeowner does not close the gap in life satisfaction between the situation with and without children.

Overall, the age of the partners does not emerge as a major determinant of Anna's or Leonardo's wellbeing. In the vignettes with children (Table 2), the partners' life satisfaction does not change with their age. In contrast, life satisfaction decreases with age when the fictitious partners are childless, especially for women: when Anna has no children and is aged 40, her life satisfaction has been rated to decrease by 0.19 points compared to when she is aged 27 (Table 3).

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

The last result concerns the role played by family policies. In Figure 4, we interact the number of children with the two family policies (i.e., school opening hours and financial transfers) and compare it with the average levels of life satisfaction in the vignettes where the couple is childless (corresponding to the values presented in Figure 2). Figure 4 suggests that generous family policies have the potential to increase the wellbeing premium associated with children, for women as well as for men: the perceived SWB associated with either one or two children and generous policies, that is, 200€ of financial transfers per month and schools closing at 4.30 pm, is higher than the SWB of the childless couple for Leonardo and equivalent to that of the childless couple for Anna. When family policies are scarce (the opposite case: 50€ of transfers per month and schools closing at 12.30), the perceived SWB of Leonardo and Anna deteriorates compared to the childless situation, although to a greater extent for Anna. It can also be noted that the combination of family policies has been ranked according to the generosity of transfers and not to the opening time of schools.

Taken together, these results suggest that children can bring a wellbeing premium to Anna only when contextual and couple conditions are favourable, while Leonardo's wellbeing premium associated with children emerges also when conditions are at an average level.

3.2 Heterogeneity by respondents' characteristics

To check how respondents' characteristics affected the evaluation of vignettes, we run the four baseline models separately by two demographic characteristics: gender and parenthood status. Results are shown in the Appendix (Figure 2A, 3A).

Respondents' gender heavily influenced the ratings (Figure 2A). Considering vignettes with children first, it can be noted that women rated Anna's life satisfaction associated with most of the vignette dimensions more negatively compared to Leonardo's. Differences are remarkable in the dimensions related to the gendered division of paid and unpaid work. In contrast, women consistently

evaluated more positively each aspect associated with Leonardo's life satisfaction. Comparing Anna's and Leonardo's predicted life satisfaction in presence of children, it can be seen that also men rated more positively Leonardo's situation than Anna's. As such, the gender difference in the wellbeing associated with children observed in Figure 2 has (also) been driven by respondents' own gender and, likely, by their own experiences. In the vignettes without children, women's evaluations are more positive than men's, although to a smaller extent.

Respondents' own parenthood status also influenced the vignette ratings (Figure 3A). Namely, respondents with children evaluated more positively all the dimensions, in vignettes with and without children, for both Anna and Leonardo. This indicates that childless respondents have more negative attitudes related to the wellbeing of partners with children. Differences between parents and childless respondents are bigger in the vignettes with children.

4. Discussion

Thanks to a novel data collection conducted in Italy in 2025 that includes a Factorial Survey Experiment, this study investigates how children are perceived to contribute to subjective wellbeing. We contribute to the scholarship on parenthood and SWB and to the debate on low fertility by identifying how the number of children is perceived to affect life satisfaction, the factors that moderate this effect, and how these vary between women and men. Our findings shed light on the childbearing decision-making process and, eventually, on the factors that are perceived as obstacles to having children by the Italian population in reproductive age.

Our main finding is that, among Italians aged 25-49, children are perceived to contribute to parents' life satisfaction in a gendered way: on average, they are perceived to bring a small wellbeing premium to men (Leonardo) and a wellbeing penalty to women (Anna). The perceived negative effect of children on women's wellbeing can be explained by the persisting norms surrounding motherhood, requiring mothers to make sacrifices to invest in their children's needs, while equivalent norms for fathers have yet to be established (Lebano & Jamieson, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2023) – especially in the Italian context, characterised by low female employment and scarce family policies (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022). Not surprisingly, women respondents are the ones who evaluated more negatively Anna's wellbeing with children. However, because household labour and the related cognitive labour tend to weigh disproportionately on women in most Western countries (Daminger, 2019; Pailhé et al., 2021), we believe these results may be well extended to other contexts, although with differing magnitudes. In line with recent findings from other Western countries (Aassve, Adserà, et al., 2024; Behrman et al., 2025), we also found no statistically significant difference between the life satisfaction associated with having one or two children, indicating that parenthood is perceived to affect parents' life satisfaction irrespective of the number of children. This result questions the stability of the two-child norm (Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2014).

Comparing scenarios with and without children, we observe that few factors make Anna's life satisfaction with children similar to the levels observed in the childless scenario: an equal division of domestic and care work, generous family policies (i.e., long school hours and monthly financial transfers of 200€), and access to flexible work. Hence, this paper importantly highlights that work arrangements and family policies promoting gender equality and reducing the work-family conflict have the potential to improve parents' wellbeing (Gauthier & Gietel-Basten, 2024). In contrast, the

male-breadwinner scenario in the division of paid and unpaid work has been perceived to bring a higher wellbeing to Leonardo when the couple has children vs. when the couple has no children, suggesting that gender specialization (Becker, 1981) may be perceived as optimal for Italian fathers. Nevertheless, flexible work for fathers has also been found to positively affect their ascribed life satisfaction, indicating that some change in family roles is on its way, as observed by recent research (Aassve, Mencarini, et al., 2024). Being homeowners compared to renters increases the partners' life satisfaction but does not make scenarios with children preferable to scenarios without children, signalling that homeownership may not be perceived as a precondition for childbearing (?). Despite increasing ages at parenthood currently being observed in Italy, the age of the partners is also not perceived to make a difference in terms of life satisfaction with and without children.

A drawback of the current study relies in the use of a non-random sample of the Italian population, which could make results less generalizable. Nevertheless, the use of a quota sampling strategy reduces this risk, and the design of FSE allows to draw conclusion about causal mechanisms even with non-random samples (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015).

By addressing the desirability and, more broadly, the conceptualization of parenthood among individuals who are currently in reproductive age, our understanding of fertility decisions may improve considerably; future research could explore this research avenue in other contexts, with particular attention to gender-specific mechanisms.

Tables

Table 1. Vignette dimensions and levels

	Levels	
Dimensions	Vignettes with no children	Vignettes with children
1. Number and age of children	The couple has no children.	a. The couple has a 6-year-old child b. The couple has two children aged 4 and 6.
2. Age of the partners	a. He is 29 years old, she is 27 years old. b. He is 37, she is 35. c. He is 42, she is 40.	a. He is 29 years old, she is 27 years old. b. He is 37, she is 35. c. He is 42, she is 40.
3. Housing situation	The couple lives: a. In a house owned by them b. In a rented house.	The couple lives: a. In a house owned by them b. In a rented house.
4. Employment status and flexibility	a. He can organise his working hours autonomously, while she cannot b. He cannot organise his working hours autonomously, while she can c. He and she cannot organise their working hours autonomously d. He works, she does not.	a. He can organise his working hours autonomously, while she cannot b. He cannot organise his working hours autonomously, while she can c. He and she cannot organise their working hours autonomously d. He works, she does not.
5. Division of domestic and care work	Domestic work is: a. equally divided between the partners b. mainly done by her.	Domestic work and childcare are: a. equally divided between the partners b. mainly done by her.
6. School opening hours	-	In the municipality of residence, primary and lower secondary schools close: a. at 12.30 a.m. b. at 4.30 p.m.
7. Financial transfers	-	For each child, the couple receives in form of child benefit: a. 50 euros per month b. 200 euros per month.

Table 2. Multilevel linear regression model, vignettes with children.

	Leonardo's life satisfaction	Anna's life satisfaction
Age (ref: he is 29, she is 27)		
He is 37, she is 35	0.0168	-0.0117
	(0.0326)	(0.0352)
He is 42, she is 40	-0.0477	-0.0633
	(0.0331)	(0.0357)
Two children, 4 and 6 yo (ref: one child, 6 yo)	-0.0623*	-0.0848**
	(0.0269)	(0.0290)
Owned home (ref: rented home)	0.453***	0.386***
	(0.0270)	(0.0291)
Employment status and flexibility (ref: neither have flexible work arrangements)		
He's employed, she's not	0.183***	-0.00706
	(0.0380)	(0.0410)
He hasn't flexible work, she has	0.0223	0.473***
	(0.0382)	(0.0412)
He has flexible work, she hasn't	0.582***	-0.0563
	(0.0381)	(0.0412)
Equal division of housework and childcare (ref: mainly done by her)	0.0337	0.590***
	(0.0268)	(0.0289)
School full-time (ref: part-time)	0.104***	0.184***
	(0.0268)	(0.0290)
Financial transfers: 200€ per child (ref: 50€)	0.318***	0.312***
	(0.0268)	(0.0290)
Constant	6.099***	5.464***
	(0.0473)	(0.0512)
Intercept variance, Respondent level	1.947***	2.350***
	(0.0496)	(0.0591)
Residual variance	1.366***	1.581***
	(0.0249)	(0.0288)
N	12,018	12,018

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Multilevel linear regression model, vignettes without children.

	Leonardo's life satisfaction	Anna's life satisfaction
Age (ref: he is 29, she is 27)		
He is 37, she is 35	-0.158***	-0.140***
	(0.0380)	(0.0377)
He is 42, she is 40	-0.141***	-0.190***
	(0.0377)	(0.0374)
Owned home (ref: rented home)	0.452***	0.443***
	(0.0309)	(0.0306)
Employment status and flexibility (ref: neither have flexible work arrangements)		
He's employed, she's not	-0.0911*	-0.156***
	(0.0439)	(0.0435)
He hasn't flexible work, she has	0.273***	0.214***
	(0.0434)	(0.0430)
He has flexible work, she hasn't	0.215***	0.261***
	(0.0437)	(0.0433)
Equal division of housework and childcare (ref: mainly done by her)	0.355***	0.329***
	(0.0308)	(0.0306)
Constant	6.242***	6.282***
	(0.0456)	(0.0454)
Intercept variance, Respondent level	1.519***	1.593***
	(0.0498)	(0.0503)
Residual variance	2.031***	1.971***
	(0.0370)	(0.0359)
N	12,018	12,018

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figures

Figure 1. Example of the vignette with introductory text (translated version)

Leonardo and Anna live together about an hour's drive away from their parents. They are both in good health and manage to make ends meet.

- Leonardo is **29** years old, Anna is **27**.
- They live in a house **owned** by them.
- They have **two children** aged 4 and 6.

- Leonardo **can organise his working hours autonomously**, Anna **cannot**.
- Domestic work and childcare are **equally divided** between Leonardo and Anna.

- In the municipality of residence, primary and lower secondary schools close at **12.30**.
- For each child, Leonardo and Anna receive **200 euros** per month in form of child benefit.

According to the provided information:

How satisfied do you think **Leonardo** is with his life? *Use a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 = 'not at all satisfied' and 10 = 'very satisfied'.*

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How satisfied do you think **Anna** is with her life? *Use a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 = 'not at all*

Figure 2. Mean life satisfaction by the fictitious partner's gender and number of children

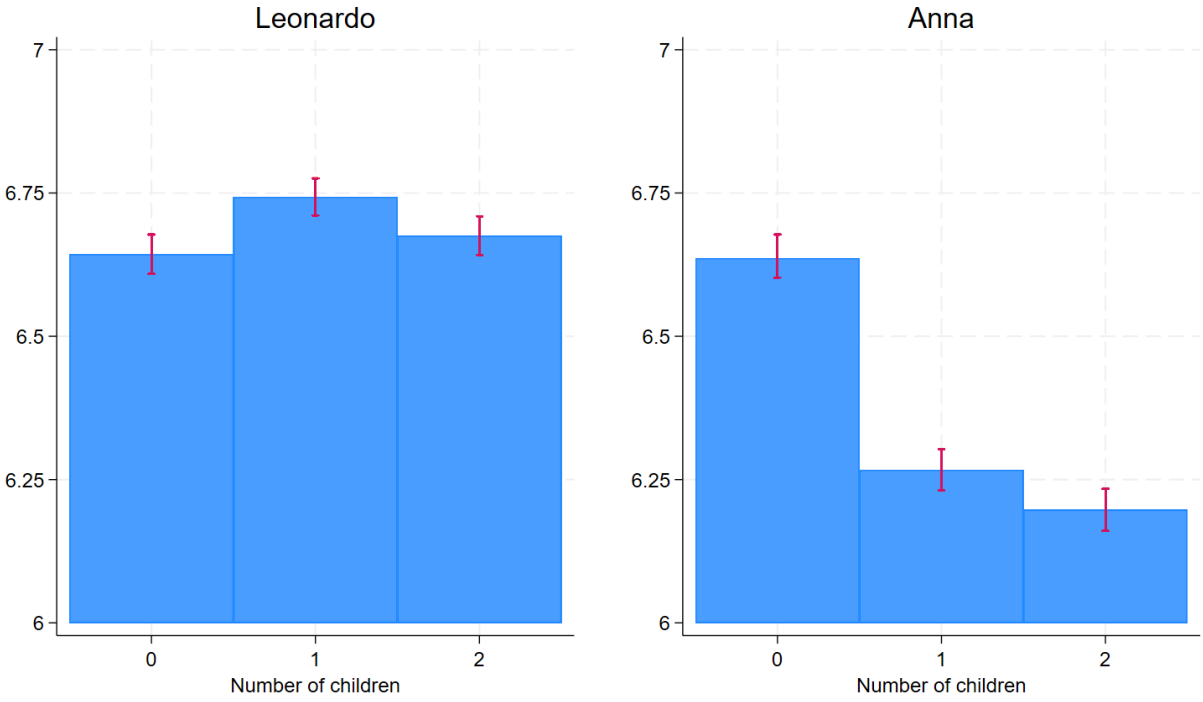
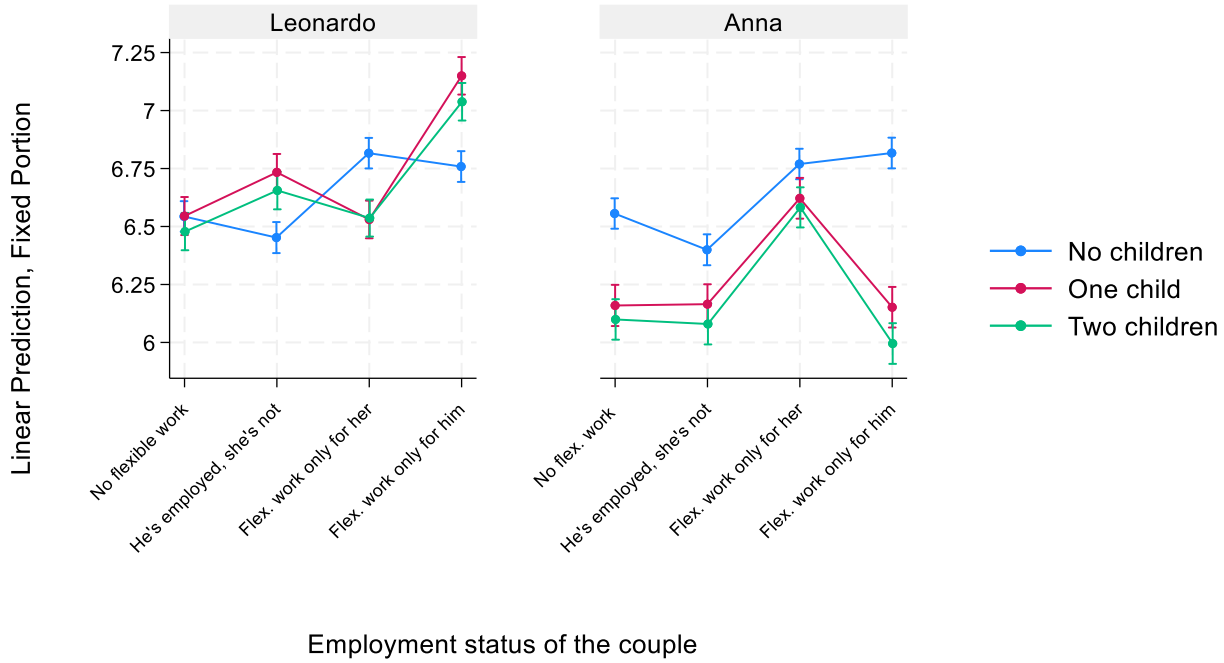


Figure 3. Predicted life satisfaction by the fictitious partner's gender, number of children, and couple-level dimensions, comparing models with (N=12,018) and without children (N=12,018)

a. Employment status and flexibility



b. Division of domestic and care work

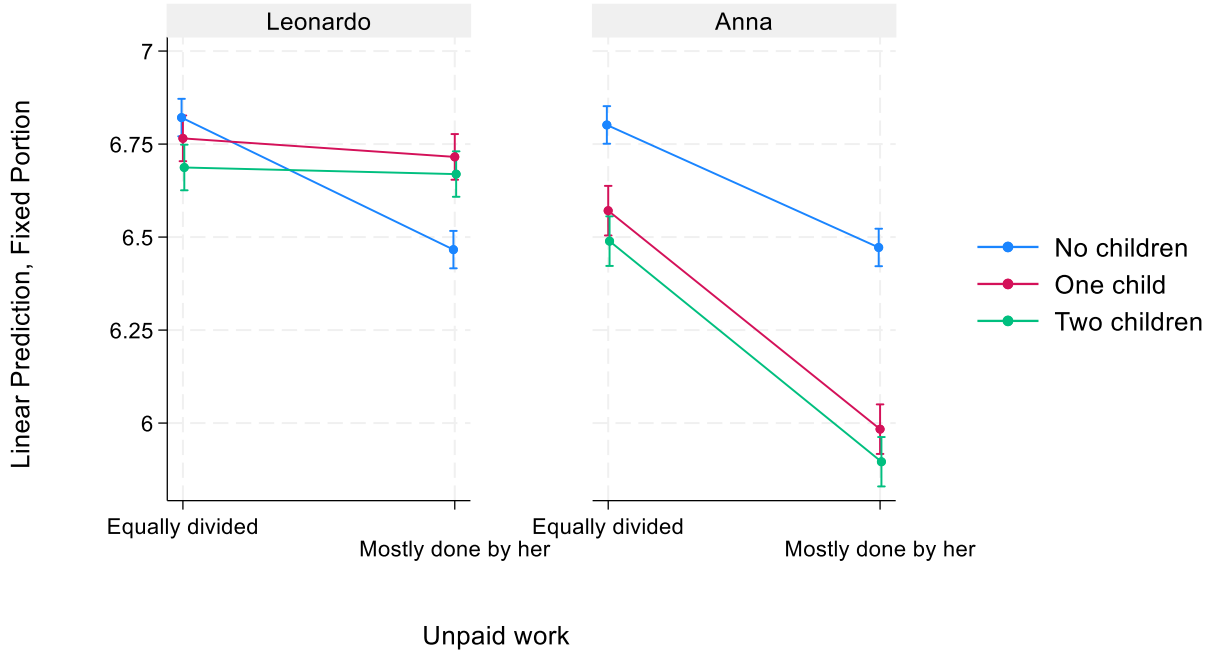
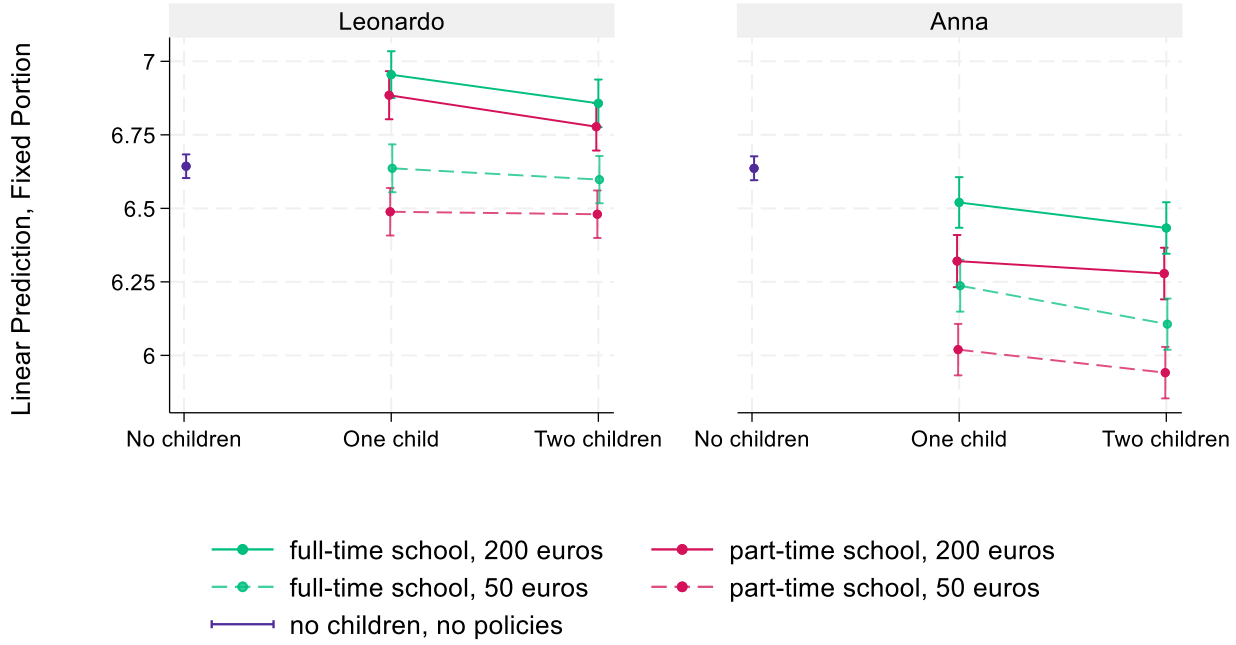


Figure 4. Predicted life satisfaction by the fictitious partner's gender, number of children, couple-level and contextual dimensions, comparing models with (N=12,018) and without children (N=12,018)



Note: the life satisfaction in the childless situation is an average, corresponding to that presented in Figure 2.

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Appendix

Figure 1A: Predicted life satisfaction by the fictitious partner's gender, number of children, and couple-level dimensions, comparing models with (N=12,018) and without children (N=12,018)

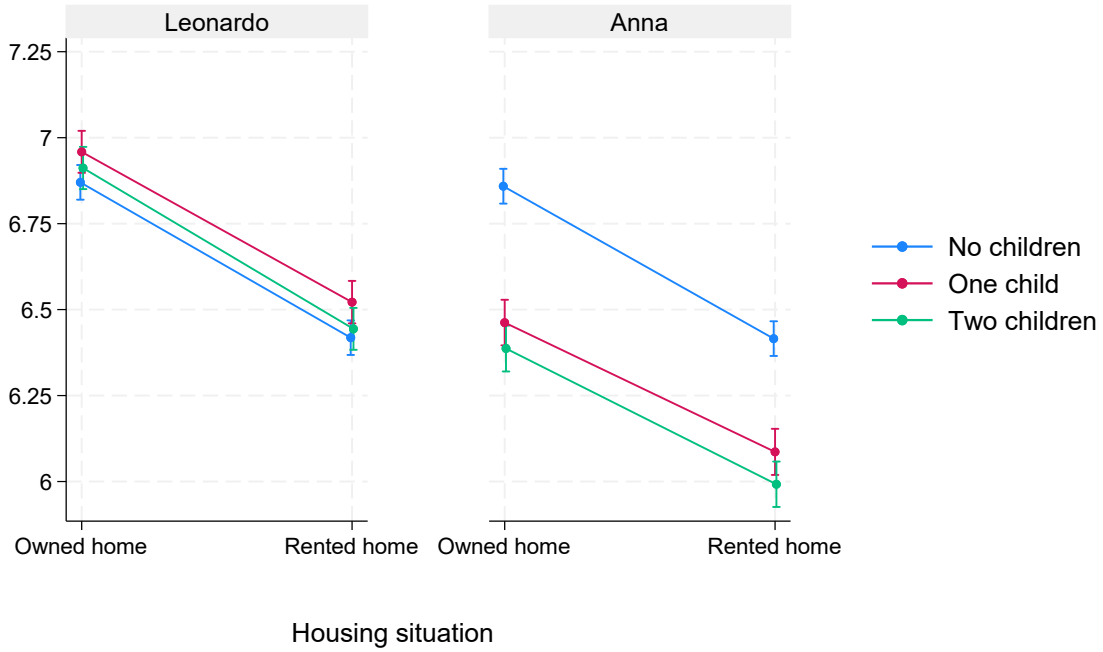
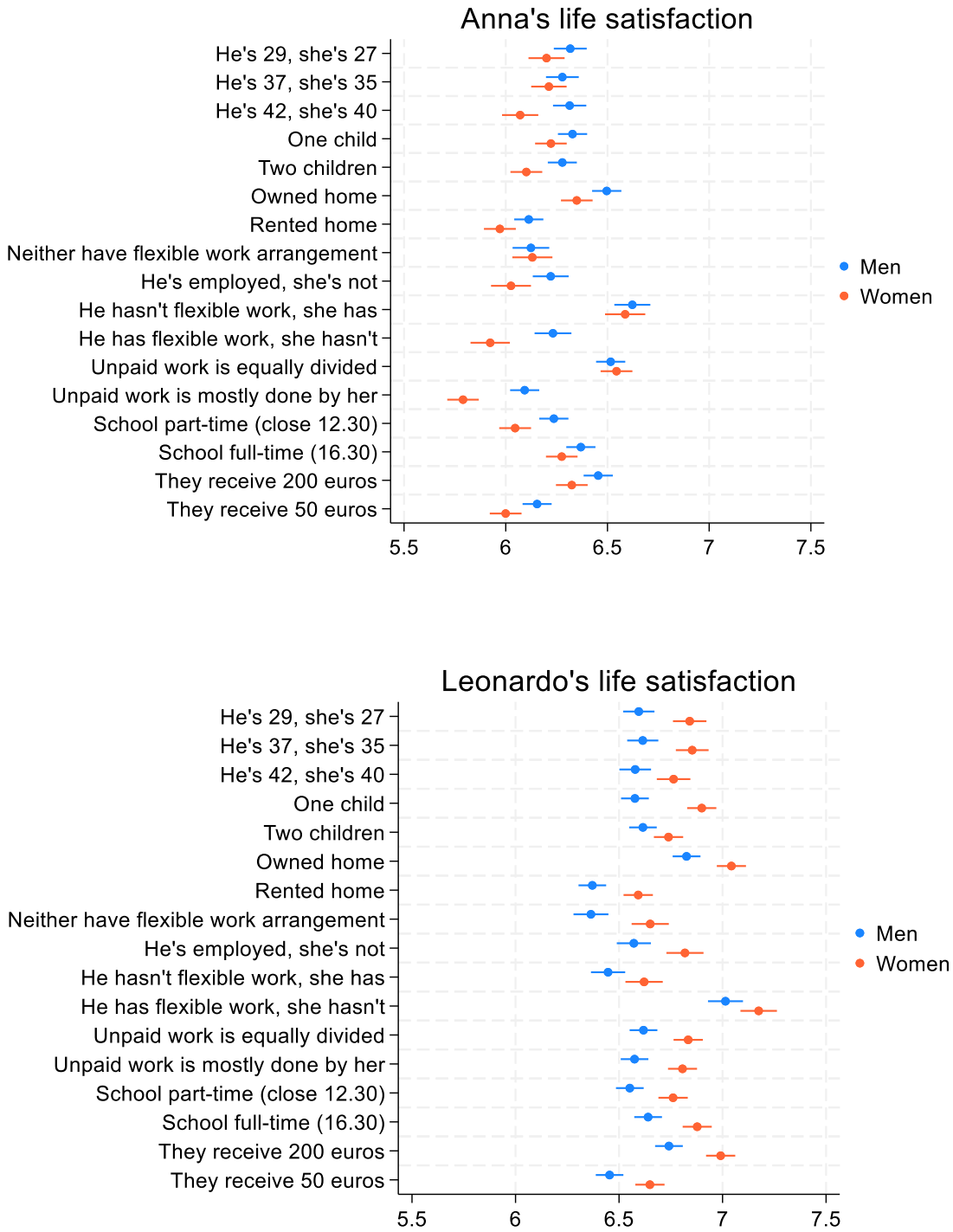
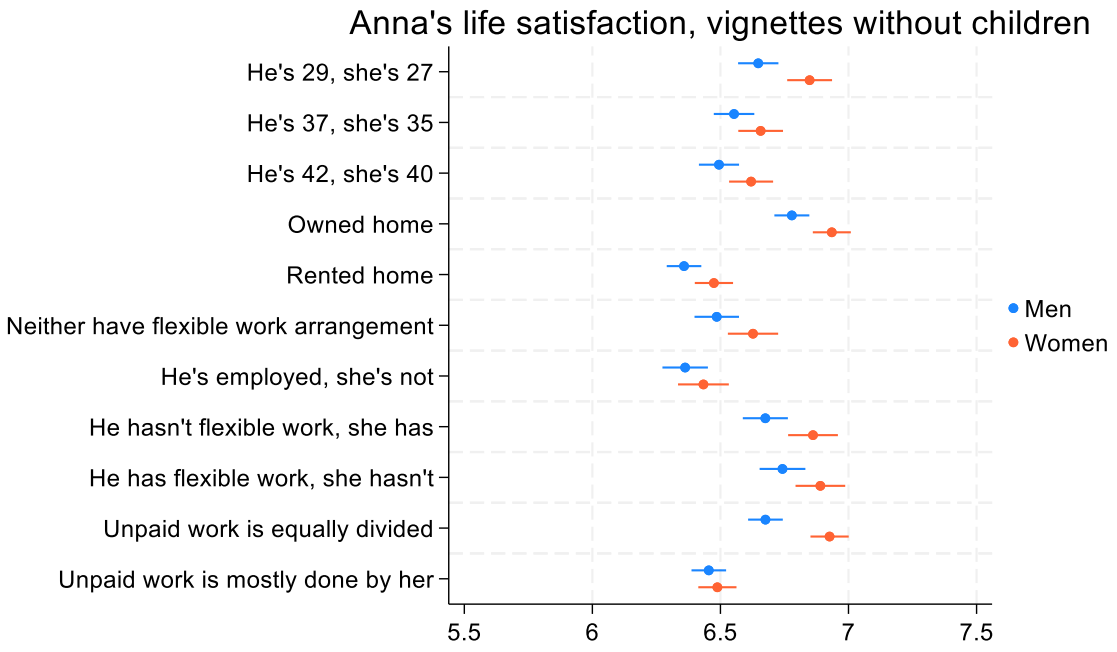


Figure 2A: Predicted life satisfaction by vignette dimension, by gender of the fictitious partner, number of children, and respondents' gender

a. Models with children



b. Models without children



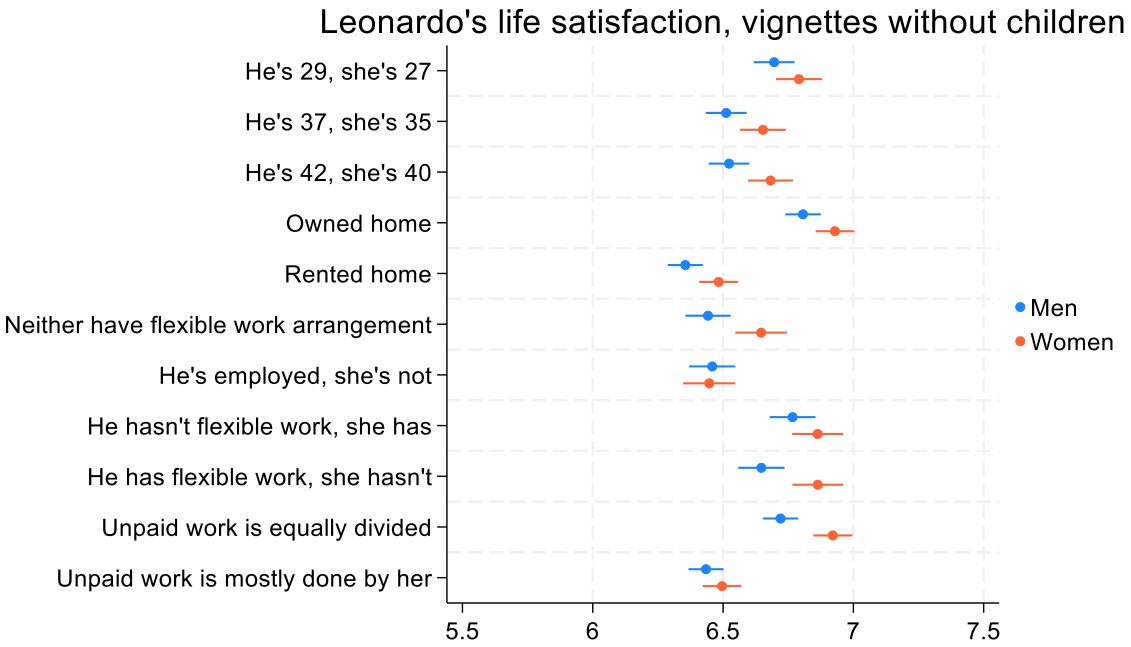
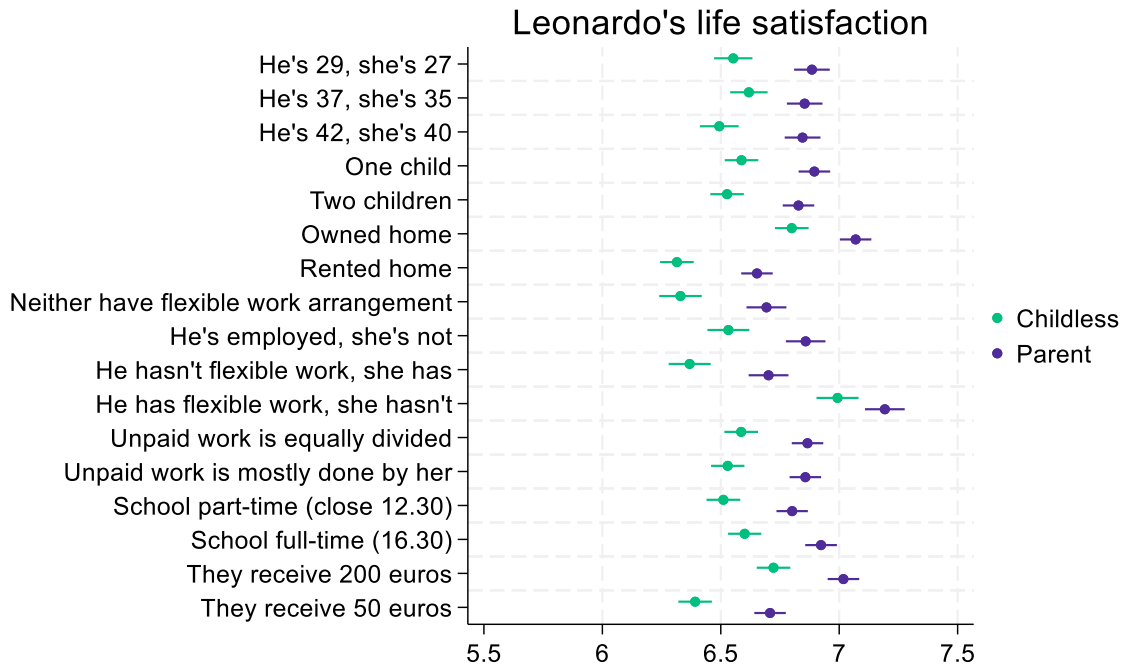


Figure 3A: Predicted life satisfaction by vignette dimension, by gender of the fictitious partner, number of children, and respondents' parenthood status

a. Models with children



b. Models without children