

Gender Differences in Social Integration: The Role of Paid Work

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Extended Abstract

Introduction and Research Questions

During the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe, 2010), female labor force participation expanded substantially (Edlund & Öun, 2016), traditional work-care arrangements declined (Trappe et al., 2015), and male-breadwinner norms eroded (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015). However, the assumed symmetry in gender roles has not yet been achieved. The “gender revolution” appears stalled (Goldscheider et al., 2015), and significant gender inequalities in employment persist (Levanon & Grusky, 2016).

According to Marie Jahoda (1981), gainful employment is a key driver of social integration because it provides both manifest functions (e.g., socio-economic security) and latent functions (e.g., social contacts, activation, status, identity, time structure, and collective goals). Starting with this framework, the present study examines gender differences in perceived levels of social integration – understood and measured as co-orientations and co-interactions (Grunow et al., 2023) – through the lens of employment. Based on gendered employment patterns in Germany, women should feel less socially integrated than men, because they more often work in low-paid and/or lower status occupational positions, part-time, and experience more employment interruptions (Buchler & Lutz, 2021; Grunow, 2019).

Paradoxically, empirical evidence shows that women report higher levels of social integration (Schöb, 2013) and display greater stability in their perceived social integration in the face of unemployment and other employment disruptions than men (Giustozzi, 2023). This highlights the relevance of examining the potential sources of gender differences in social integration, as unemployment and lower occupational status should reduce social integration (Batinic et al., 2010; Beck et al., 2024).

This study addresses these gendered differences in social integration by posing two questions: (1) To what extent do occupational class-specific integration potentials contribute to gender differences in social integration? (2) How do gender ideologies moderate the link between occupational class and perceived levels of social integration?

Theoretical and empirical background

We build on Jahoda’s work on the importance of paid work for social integration (Jahoda, 1981), employing a new concept of social integration which emphasizes the importance of co-orientations

(consensus and trust), as well as co-interactions (conformity and cooperation) in society (Grunow et al., 2023). According to this framework, gender differences in employment play a central role for social integration, as gender inequalities in the labor market are expected to generate different integration potentials. Men and women tend to work in different occupations with varying social status, income, and prestige, as well as distinct opportunities for social contacts. Even within the same professional field, women are more likely to occupy lower-status positions than men (Charles, 2011; Charles & Bradley, 2009). The transition to parenthood further exacerbates these differences because women face long-term employment disadvantages (Collischon et al., 2025). More generally, the unequal division of care work, with men rarely sharing care work equally with their partners, should negatively affect women's social integration potential (Pinho et al., 2024; Rivera, 2025).

We expect that the social integration paradox, according to which women still report higher integration levels than men, can be partly explained by two mechanisms: differences in latent social integration potential across occupational classes and gendered perceptions of integration within these classes.

Gendered perceptions are modeled by means of respondents' gender ideologies. The gender ideology perspective highlights the different gender roles assigned to and internalized by men and women (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004). While traditional gender ideologies have declined, multidimensional gender ideologies have spread in recent years. Multidimensional gender ideologies combine gender-egalitarian orientations in one domain of work with gender essentialist orientations in others (Begall et al., 2023; Grunow et al., 2018). For example, a large fraction of society supports paid work participation for men and women while holding women primarily responsible for housework and care, denying men the capacity for care (Scarborough et al., 2019).

We thus expect internalized gender ideologies to shape individuals' perceptions of own social integration, moderating the relationship between occupational class membership and integration outcomes.

Data & Methods

We employ the German Social Cohesion Panel (SCP) conducted by the German Research Institute Social Cohesion. The SCP, starting in 2021/22 with a first wave and continuing in annual waves, is based on a representative population sample drawn from the German population registers. The SCP is a self-administered study comprising a wide range of relevant indicators on respondents' employment, subjective social integration, and gender attitudes (Gerlitz et al., 2024). Our analytical sample includes respondents aged 18 to 67 and not retired, comprising 2,315 men and 2,411 women.

Our analytical strategy consists of three steps. First, we operationalize the social integration potential of employment using indicators such as respondents' occupational class, employment status, job position, working hours, and individual share of household income, controlling for household income. Second, we assess respondents' gender ideology based on their membership in gender ideology classes, derived from latent class analysis (Vermunt & Magidson, 2004). Third, we estimate regression models that include the social integration potential of respondents' occupations and their gender ideology class membership as explanatory variables. The dependent variables capture subjective social integration in terms of co-orientations, such as trust in political institutions and the perceived availability of support in personal, financial/legal, and professional matters, as well as co-interactions, for example, membership in associations, participation in social, cultural and religious activities, and the perceived availability of support structures for personal, financial/legal, and professional matters.

First results and next steps

In a preliminary descriptive overview, we find the expected gender-specific differences in employment and occupational class. The share of men working full-time is higher than that of women, whereas women are more often not employed at all. We also find differences between occupational class membership for men and women. Next, we will analyze gender differences within these classes, such as working hours and the share of household income in more detail to develop robust indicators of the social integration potential provided by employment.

We further identified four gender ideology classes that differ in both size and response patterns to various gender attitude items, covering attitudes toward equitable divisions of paid and unpaid work, men's capability for domestic (care) work, effects of maternal employment for child well-being, men's provider role, and the use of public childcare. The largest class in our sample is labeled egalitarian, covering 47% of respondents (45% men and 55% women). This class is characterized by consistently high conditional probabilities of egalitarian responses to each gender ideology item. The second class covers the other end of the attitudinal spectrum and is labeled moderate traditional class. It comprises 14% of respondents (62% men and 38% women) and shows consistently low conditional probabilities of egalitarian responses. In addition, we find two multidimensional classes, combining egalitarian and traditional responses: a secondary earner class (34%, with 47% men and 53% women) and an ambivalent class (5%, with 64% men and 36% women).

To answer our research questions, we conducted preliminary logistic regression analyses, using the availability of support in personal, financial/legal, and professional matters as our dependent variable. Compared to men, women are significantly more likely to report having social support networks in all three areas of life. This effect remains statistically significant after controlling for occupational class, working hours, and gender ideology classes.

Focusing on co-orientations as our main dependent variable, support for professional matters shows significant differences between occupational classes. Compared to skilled workers, individuals in higher occupational classes have a significantly higher odds ratio reporting support networks. Next, we aim to develop a more systematic understanding of how different dimensions of subjective social integration depend on employment characteristics and gender ideologies. Further, we want to shed light on the interaction effects of gender ideology and occupational classes.

Discussion

In summary, our preliminary analyses reveal gender-specific differences in the social integration potential of occupational classes and in the availability of social support networks. We also identify competing gender ideology groups that shape individuals' perceptions of social integration. Moreover, there are gender differences in gender ideologies. Together, these differences might contribute to the social integration paradox. It could also be understood as a reason for the gendered status quo (Skewes et al., 2018) and why the assumed symmetry in gender roles has not been achieved yet.

Overall, these findings highlight that employment is both a driver of social integration and a source of gender inequality. Internalized gender ideologies and employment status appear to influence the stalled gender revolution and gendered differences in social integration.

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