

Involved Fathers, Conflicted Lives:

Structural and Normative Barriers to Fathers' Well-Being Across Europe

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, research on parental well-being has gained increasing attention in family sociology. Much of this work has focused on how the combination of paid and unpaid work affects mothers' stress levels, work–family conflict, and life satisfaction (e.g. Mencarini & Sironi, 2012; Cerrato & Cifre, 2018; Michel et al. 2011; Shockley et al. 2017). Although many studies include both parents, fathers often appear as a side note in the interpretation of results. Only more recently have researchers started to examine fathers' well-being in its own right, showing that fatherhood can be associated with both gains and losses in life satisfaction depending on contextual and work-related conditions (Pollmann-Schult, 2010, 2014; Schröder, 2018; Regina & Allen, 2025). These studies highlight that while becoming a father may initially enhance happiness, structural constraints such as long working hours or limited flexibility can reduce the time and energy available for family life, which in turn affects fathers' overall well-being.

Yet, a growing body of evidence shows that fathers' involvement in childcare is crucial not only for their own well-being but also for the well-being of mothers and children. Studies have demonstrated that emotionally engaging interactions enhance fathers' happiness and mental health (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Craig & Mullan, 2013; Musick et al., 2016) while simultaneously benefiting children's emotional development and reducing mothers' stress by redistributing care responsibilities (Offer, 2013; Rusu et al., 2025). Active fatherhood thus represents both an individual and a social resource – linked to relationship quality, family cohesion, and more sustainable gender equality.

Research finds that not all forms of paternal involvement are equally rewarding and mothers report lower well-being during childcare than fathers in the US, largely because they spend more time on routine and time-pressured tasks. Fathers, in contrast, are more involved in play and leisure activities, which are typically associated with higher happiness (Musick et al., 2016). This pattern raises an important question for Europe, where men have gradually increased their participation in childcare but remain unevenly involved across different types of tasks. As more fathers take on routine care, the well-being implications may also change. Understanding how different forms of involvement – and deviations from national norms of fatherhood – relate to subjective well-being is therefore essential.

Building on these insights, the present study shifts the focus towards men's engagement in family life and investigates how structural and normative barriers shape fathers' well-being across Europe. Using data from the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), we distinguish

between specific childcare tasks – ranging from routine care to interactive activities – to examine how the type and context of involvement relate to fathers’ happiness, life satisfaction, and perceived work–family conflict.

2. Theoretical Framework

To capture both the enriching and the demanding aspects of fathers’ childcare involvement, our study combines three complementary micro-level perspectives with a contextual macro-level approach.

(1) Role Strain and Role Enhancement Theory explains how combining work and family roles can generate either stress or enrichment depending on time pressure and perceived rewards.

(2) Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) conceptualises time, energy, and emotional balance as finite resources; well-being depends on whether these can be replenished or are depleted through multiple demands.

(3) The Demands-Rewards Perspective (Meier, 1993; Voydanoff, 2004) refines this by distinguishing between emotionally rewarding and routine or time-intensive childcare tasks, which may produce contrasting effects on well-being.

At the macro level, we draw on Person-Environment Fit Theory and the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000) to situate these processes in broader structural and normative contexts. Fathers’ well-being depends on the alignment between their aspirations for active involvement (“want to”) and the institutional or workplace conditions that constrain their ability to act (“can do”). A mismatch between these dimensions – for example, long working hours or a lack of flexible arrangements – may reduce well-being even where family policies are generous.

This integrated framework highlights that not only the type of childcare activity matters for fathers’ well-being, but also whether the context allows them to engage in ways consistent with their values and societal expectations.

3. Data and Methods

Our analyses draw on data from the first wave of GGS Round II collected between 2020 and 2024, which provides harmonised information on family structures, work arrangements, and individual well-being, offering a unique opportunity to investigate task-specific parental involvement in a comparative framework. We use data from twelve European countries that had completed fieldwork at the time of analysis: Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, UK, Norway, Moldova, and the Netherlands.

The analytical sample includes fathers aged 18–49 in partnerships with at least one child under the age of six who were employed at the time of the interview. Focusing on this group allows us to examine the interplay between work demands and family engagement during a phase of intensive childcare. Our dependent variables capture subjective well-being through three indicators: *life satisfaction*, *perceived work–family*, and *family–work conflict*.

A distinctive feature of the GGS is that it records the frequency of different childcare tasks performed by each parent. We consider four activities that represent varying degrees of routine and emotional involvement: *dressing the child*, *caring when ill*, *playing with the child*, and

putting the child to bed. These indicators allow us to move beyond aggregated measures of “time with children” and to identify the specific domains in which fathers are more or less involved.

Independent variables include working hours, commuting time, and partner’s employment, capturing structural constraints on fathers’ time resources. To account for socio-economic background, we control for education, occupational class, and household income, as well as for family structure (number and age of children, marital status, and whether the child is biological or a stepchild). Finally, we include indicators of gender role attitudes and societal norms derived from contextual data to represent normative environments.

The empirical strategy combines descriptive cross-national comparisons with multivariate regression models to identify the associations between different types of childcare involvement and fathers’ well-being. Analyses are conducted separately for each well-being indicator, and robustness checks test whether results hold when accounting for working hours, time constraints, and socio-economic status. While causal inference is beyond the scope of this cross-sectional design, the harmonised GGS data allow for consistent comparisons across diverse welfare regimes and provide novel insights into the structural and normative determinants of fathers’ well-being.

4. Results

The descriptive results in Table 1 reveal striking cross-national differences in how fathers across Europe engage in childcare. While fathers are increasingly involved in their children’s daily lives, the *extent and nature* of this involvement vary substantially between countries and across specific care activities. In Northern Europe and the UK, fathers are more involved in both routine and interactive tasks compared to Western, Central and Eastern Europe. Yet even in these more egalitarian welfare states, involvement is far from uniform: many fathers are more active in playful or leisure-oriented tasks but less so in everyday routines such as dressing children or caring for them when they are ill.

Table 1: Fathers’ involvement in childcare tasks across Europe

	DK	FI	NL	NO	UK	AT	FR	DE	HR	CZ	EE	MD	Tot.
Dressing	41.0	43.4	44.7	60.8	48.8	27.6	43.4	34.1	42.9	32.4	39.4	37.8	39.9
Staying with ill children	72.5	66.9	60.1	80.5	59.9	50.9	52.4	41.4	47.0	29.9	45.8	29.3	50.4
Playing with children	88.1	89.2	81.1	94.4	83.3	84.1	81.6	67.9	88.5	73.4	83.3	75.5	79.0
Putting children to bed	77.5	81.3	82.9	89.6	75.2	72.4	72.7	70.3	66.1	64.1	61.4	49.5	71.6
n	444	251	456	395	359	214	548	1962	434	432	681	188	6364

Involvement shown by percentage of fathers who report that it is not only their partner or someone else who takes over the specific tasks

These descriptive patterns offer one of the few comparative overviews of fatherhood in Europe, showing that there is no single model of “involved fatherhood.” National differences reflect the

interplay of labour-market structures, gender norms, and policy designs. Contexts that combine shorter working hours and flexible employment arrangements with more egalitarian gender attitudes show higher levels of paternal engagement across all tasks, whereas in countries with stronger breadwinner expectations, men’s participation remains more selective despite supportive policies.

Preliminary multivariate analyses using country fixed-effects models (Table 2) indicate that not all forms of paternal involvement are equally related to well-being. Fathers who engage more often in interactive activities such as playing with their children report higher life satisfaction and lower levels of conflict in both directions. In contrast, greater engagement in time-pressured or routine care tasks, such as staying with a sick child, is linked to higher family-to-work conflict, suggesting that such obligations interfere with fathers’ work responsibilities. However, these routine tasks are not associated with lower life satisfaction. Overall, the findings suggest that emotionally rewarding and voluntary forms of involvement are beneficial for fathers’ well-being, whereas obligatory and time-critical tasks may increase strain.

Table 2: Regressions of life satisfaction, family-work conflict, and work-family conflict

	Life satisfaction	Family–work conflict	Work–family conflict
Dressing	0.02	0.05	-0.10
Staying with ill children	-0.04	0.12*	-0.22***
Playing with children	0.28***	-0.11*	-0.39***
Putting children to bed	0.09**	0.00	-0.19***
R ²	0.10	0.08	0.13
Observations	6,364	6,364	6,364

Control variables: employment (full-time or part-time) partner's employment (full-time, part-time or not working), number of children, age of the youngest child, age of the oldest child, age of the respondent, family status (married or in a relationship), education (low/high), making ends meet (with difficulty/easily), and country

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

5. Conclusions

Taken together, the findings provide both a comparative overview and a first analytical insight. Descriptively, they provide a rare, systematic picture of how fathers’ care practices differ across Europe. The preliminary analyses further suggest that different forms of paternal involvement are not equally rewarding, with interactive activities being associated with higher life satisfaction and time-pressured routine tasks linked to greater family-to-work conflict.

Future research will incorporate time constraints and individual gender-role attitudes in more depth to clarify how these factors interact with institutional and societal expectations. A mismatch between egalitarian attitudes and traditional family-role expectations may lower fathers’ satisfaction and heighten work-to-family conflict, whereas a mismatch between traditional attitudes and egalitarian social norms may increase family-to-work conflict. Understanding these tensions is crucial for identifying the barriers and opportunities for a more gender-equal division of childcare. The findings underline that fathers’ well-being is not only shaped by how much they participate in childcare but also by the structural and cultural environments that enable or restrict such involvement.

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