

# Experiencing the Demands of Parenthood: How Unpaid Care Work Shapes Parental Well-Being in Germany

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The transition to parenthood represents a critical and transformative period in the life course, characterised by profound changes in social roles, daily routines, and emotional demands. This transition can challenge individual well-being and mental health as parents adjust to new responsibilities and expectations within and outside the family (Saxbe et al., 2018).

The existing body of research reveals highly heterogeneous findings regarding the effects of parenthood on mental well-being. While some studies document positive outcomes, such as increased life satisfaction and fulfilment (e.g., Somogyi et al., 2021), others emphasise heightened stress, anxiety, and declines in well-being associated with the early stages of parenthood (e.g., Giesselmann et al., 2018). These mixed findings suggest that the impact of becoming a parent varies depending on individual circumstances, contextual conditions and methodological approaches (Aassve et al., 2021).

Across studies, one of the most consistent findings is that the transition to parenthood affects mothers and fathers differently. Gendered differences in mental well-being are well established, yet the mechanisms underlying these disparities remain insufficiently understood. Previous research has often pointed to the unequal division of unpaid care work and persistent gender role expectations as potential explanations (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020; Pertold-Gebicka, 2022). However, these factors have rarely been examined systematically or within a longitudinal framework that captures how changes in paid and unpaid work interact with the psychological adjustment to parenthood.

Indeed, preliminary evidence suggests a negative correlation between levels of unpaid care work or overall workload with parental mental well-being (e.g., Ervin et al., 2022; Metzger & Gracia, 2025). However, for Germany, where gendered divisions of labour and a persistent care gap continue to shape family life (Diabaté & Ruckdeschel, 2024; Kühhirt, 2012), no longitudinal study has comprehensively examined how changes in unpaid care work affect the mental well-being trajectories of both mothers and fathers. Since parental outcomes are shaped by national policy frameworks and prevailing social norms (Grunow & Veltkamp, 2016), examining this relationship within the German context is particularly relevant, as insights from other welfare and cultural settings cannot easily be transferred to a context characterised by conservative family policies and enduring gendered role expectations (Fasang & Zagel, 2023).

Building on this perspective, the study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How does parental mental well-being change across the transition to parenthood, and how do these trajectories differ between mothers and fathers in Germany?
- (2) To what extent do paid and unpaid work arrangements moderate or mediate the relationship between parenthood and mental well-being?

By disentangling moderating and mediating effects, the study aims to identify the mechanisms through which gendered divisions of work and care contribute to differences in how parenthood is experienced.

Understanding the mechanisms that shape parental mental well-being is essential, as it not only addresses academic gaps but also highlights its profound implications for both individuals and society

during the transition to parenthood. Research has demonstrated that parents' mental and emotional health influences key demographic behaviours, including the decision to have additional children. Negative experiences of parenthood have been linked to a decreased likelihood of expanding family size (Luppi, 2016; Margolis & Myrskylä, 2015). Addressing low and declining fertility rates, therefore, requires a deeper understanding of the factors that support parental well-being, as well as how policies can help to reduce psychological burdens.

To explain these mechanisms, this study draws on gender theory, family stress frameworks, and life course perspectives to understand how parenthood affects mental well-being. The transition to parenthood represents not a single event but a prolonged process of adjustment that reshapes identity, time allocation, and role expectations over several years. From a life course perspective, these transformations are embedded in broader institutional and normative structures that define what is considered appropriate behaviour for mothers and fathers (Elder et al., 2003; Umberson et al., 2010). Building on gender theory, these norms and expectations around caregiving and employment generate unequal distributions of paid and unpaid work after childbirth. Such divisions typically lead to a disproportionate increase in care responsibilities for mothers, often accompanied by reductions in paid work, while fathers' employment patterns remain comparatively stable (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012). According to family stress frameworks, these imbalances can heighten psychological strain and reduce well-being, particularly when the combined demands of care and work exceed available resources such as time, energy, or social support (Pearlin, 1989; Pearlin et al., 1981). Based on this theoretical framework, three expectations guide the analysis: (1) mothers experience a stronger decline in mental well-being after childbirth than fathers, (2) increases in unpaid care work are associated with lower levels of mental well-being and (3) paid and unpaid work arrangements are expected to moderate or mediate the relationship between parenthood and mental well-being, reinforcing gendered trajectories across the transition to parenthood.

## **Data and method**

Addressing this research objective, the study draws on longitudinal data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) to examine changes in mental well-being from three years before to three years after the birth of a first child. The pre-birth period enables the assessment of potential anticipation effects, while the years following childbirth capture the early, care-intensive phase of parenthood.

The SOEP provides detailed fertility biographies and repeated measures of subjective well-being, along with rich contextual information on socio-demographic and economic measurements. Mental well-being is measured using the standardised Mental Component Summary (MCS) score from the validated SF-12v2 health questionnaire, which captures psychological distress, emotional balance, and social functioning (Andersen et al., 2007; Ware et al., 1996). This measure allows the analysis to move beyond cognitive indicators such as life satisfaction, which dominate much of the existing research. The central explanatory variable, unpaid care work, is operationalised as the total number of hours respondents report spending on childcare, household chores, errands, and minor repairs during an average weekday. This measure captures the regular, routine dimension of care work and reflects gendered differences in everyday time allocation.

For the empirical analyses, all individuals who experienced the birth of their first child within the observation window and had valid information on both mental well-being and care work were included. This results in a sample of 7,623 person-year observations from 598 women and 491 men.

Preliminary analyses employ fixed-effects regression models stratified by gender to estimate within-person changes in mental well-being over time. This approach controls for unobserved, time-invariant individual characteristics and isolates the effects of changing paid and unpaid work arrangements. Interaction terms between parenthood and care work further assess whether the relationship between becoming a parent and mental well-being is moderated or mediated by unpaid labour. The models control for time-varying characteristics, including age, partnership status, further childbirths, education, employment, and region of residence (East or West Germany), to account for concurrent life-course and contextual differences.

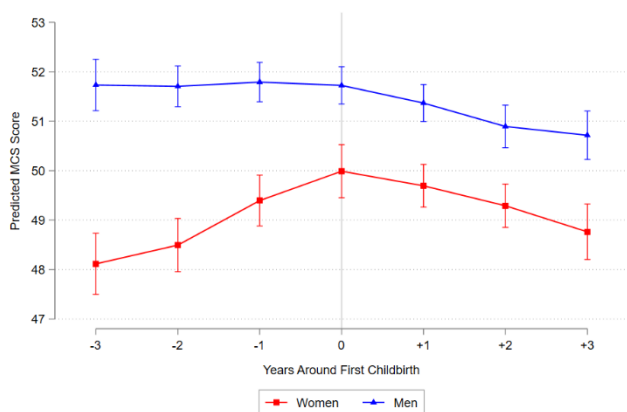
### Preliminary findings

The analyses reveal clear gendered patterns in how unpaid care work and mental well-being evolve across the transition to parenthood. Before childbirth, mothers and fathers report similar levels of unpaid care work, but this changes sharply afterwards: mothers' care hours increase substantially, while fathers' rise only slightly.

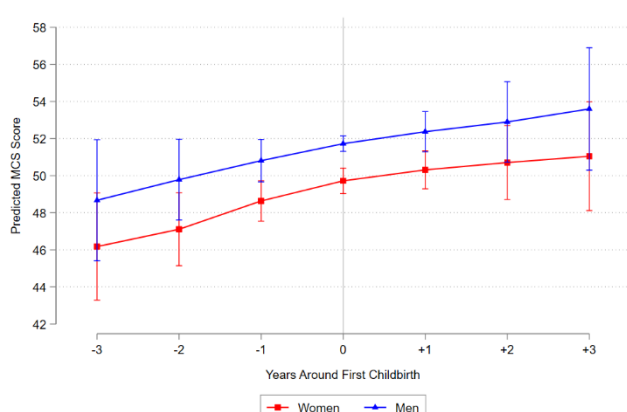
Figure 1 illustrates changes in parental mental well-being before and after the birth of the first child. Mothers show a temporary increase in well-being prior to childbirth, followed by a pronounced decline after the child's arrival. Fathers, by contrast, display relatively stable well-being before birth and only a modest decline that does not reach statistical significance. Fully adjusted models (Figure 2) that account for individual, socio-economic, and family-related characteristics attenuate these effects but do not eliminate the persistent gender gap in overall well-being. This pattern indicates that part of the observed decline may reflect broader life circumstances, such as employment changes, partnership dynamics, and social expectations, rather than the transition to parenthood itself.

Interaction analyses further show that unpaid care work moderates, rather than mediates, the relationship between parenthood and well-being. Increases in care hours are associated with steeper post-birth declines in mothers' well-being, whereas no consistent associations are observed for fathers. These findings suggest that the psychological costs of early parenthood are strongly gendered, mirroring persistent inequalities in the distribution of unpaid work.

**Figure 2:** Predicted Mental Health Trajectories Around First Childbirth, by Gender



**Figure 2:** Predicted Mental Health Trajectories Around First Childbirth with Full Set of Controls, by Gender



*Note:* The figures display predicted values of mental well-being across time based on post-estimation margins. Results are based on unweighted data, with 95% confidence intervals shown as vertical lines. Please note that y-axis scaling differs between figures.  
*Source:* SOEP v39, own calculations.

## Discussion and Outlook

The findings point to persistent gendered patterns in how care responsibilities and mental well-being evolve across the transition to parenthood. To deepen this perspective, future analyses will differentiate between specific forms of unpaid work, such as childcare, household chores, and errands, to explore whether distinct care dimensions affect mental well-being in different ways. Moreover, integrating total workload measures that combine paid and unpaid labour will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the overall organisation of work and care shapes parents' psychological adjustment. Further methodological developments will focus on testing alternative model specifications and applying bootstrap-based mediation approaches to assess indirect pathways more robustly.

As one of the first longitudinal studies to examine how changes in paid and unpaid work relate to parents' affective well-being in Germany, this project provides new evidence from a context where traditional gender norms and a persistent care gap continue to shape family life. Moving beyond cognitive indicators such as life satisfaction, the study captures the emotional dimensions of well-being that reflect parents' everyday psychological experiences. These insights refine theoretical understandings of the mechanisms linking gender, family, and well-being and are crucial for identifying the social conditions that enable parents to maintain psychological well-being in contemporary Germany.

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