

The intrinsic value of childcare: positive returns of childcare time on parents' well-being and life satisfaction in Italy¹

Introduction

A growing body of evidence shows that parents in western countries are spending increasing amounts of time with their children (among others: Gauthier et al. 2004; Dotti Sani & Treas 2016; Bianchi 2000). This finding has been positively welcomed by the scholarly community and by the wider public, because a large body of literature shows that children benefit from spending time with their parents, in terms of both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes (Cano et al. 2019; Lugo-Gil & Tamis-LeMonda 2008; Hsin & Felfe 2014; Kalil & Mayer 2016). From this perspective, the growing amounts of time that parents spend with their children are inevitably seen under a positive light and thoroughly investigated. But what about the parents? Is spending increasing amounts of time with their children beneficial to them? And, if so, do all parents experience positive returns from childcare time? Specifically, do full-time employed parents, known to spend less time with their children (Shelton & John 1996), enjoy childcare more than parents who work part-time or are not employed?

If the value of childcare in terms of benefits for children has been extensively proven, and if its monetary value in terms of childcare costs is beyond doubt, the question of the intrinsic, non-monetary value of spending time with one's children is somewhat less clear (Musick et al. 2016; Eggebeen & Knoester 2001). Using high quality, nationally representative time-diary data for Italy, this article provides a unique contribution to the literature by investigating three issues: 1) the extent to which parents enjoy time with their children; 2) whether there exists an association between childcare time and life satisfaction; 3) whether such association varies among fathers and mothers with different levels of involvement in the labor market. The Italian case is especially interesting to study this relationship due to its unique combination of lowest-low fertility levels (Dalla Zuanna 2001; OECD 2019c), low female and maternal employment (OECD 2019a) and its underdeveloped family welfare (Saraceno 1994; Esping-Andersen 1999). Moreover, because of the stark

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differences in labor market participation between women and men but also among women (OECD 2019a), the Italian context represents an excellent case to investigate the association between childcare time and life satisfaction among parents working full-time, part-time or not working at all.

Much previous research has focused on the relationship between parenthood and various forms of subjective well-being, such as life satisfaction and happiness (for detailed reviews see: Umberson et al. 2010; Nomaguchi & Milkie 2020). All these studies have in common the fact that they address the relationship between subjective well-being and parenthood as a status (i.e. being a parent) or as an event (i.e. becoming a parent), thus reflecting parents' sense of well-being while they are *away* from their children. In contrast, less empirical work has addressed the relationship between subjective well-being and parenthood as an act (i.e. parenting), and few studies have asked whether parents positively evaluate the time they spend with their children (Gershuny 2013). Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, no recent studies have asked whether an association exists between childcare time and life satisfaction (for an early exception see Eggebeen & Knoester 2001).

Reaching a more clear-cut answer on whether being a parent relates to happiness, life satisfaction and subjective well-being is relevant for the scholarly community from at least two perspectives. In the first place, the pursuit of happiness is considered a central life goal in contemporary societies and even an inalienable right (see for example in the United States). Considering that the large majority of adults eventually become parents even in contexts with sub-replacement fertility rates (Huijts et al. 2011; Kreyenfeld & Konietzka 2017), the parenthood-happiness dilemma involves millions of people. In the second place, considering the persistent low fertility rates in many western countries, demographers but also psychologists have asked whether well-being is an important pre-condition for reproductive behavior. From a demographic perspective, this is especially relevant in countries that have sub-replacement fertility rates. Indeed, recent research suggests that happier people might be more likely to have (additional) children (Mencarini et al. 2018; Luppi 2016).

Given that cross-national research has found large differences between countries in the relationship between parenthood and overall levels of life satisfaction, happiness and well-being (Nomaguchi & Milkie 2020), comparative research has asked whether country characteristics can act as buffers between the impact of having children and parents' emotional well-being. In particular, studies find a negative association between parenthood and happiness in countries that have less generous and underdeveloped policy provisions for

families with children, whereas the association is positive in generous welfare states (Aassve et al. 2015; Glass et al. 2016; Pollmann-Schult 2018). From this perspective, Italy is an interesting case study to analyze the association between parental time with children and well-being, as the country is severely underdeveloped in terms of family welfare (Saraceno 1994; Esping-Andersen 1990; Ferrera 1996) and therefore parents cannot rely on state-level help and support to cope with the economic, time-related and emotionally problematic aspects of parenthood as compared to parents in other countries (Nomaguchi & Milkie 2020).

The relationship between parenthood and well-being: a short review

The question of whether having children contributes to happiness, well-being and life satisfaction has been extensively addressed in previous studies: “decades of research documenting the benefits of social roles and relationships for mental health (Durkheim 1897; House et al. 1988)” (Glass et al. 2016, p.887) suggest that being a parent should have positive repercussions on well-being, and meshes well with the commonly accepted idea that children are a “blessing” and that parenthood, and motherhood in particular, represents the most fulfilling experience for a human being (Hansen 2012). Indeed, parenthood is often identified as a source of meaning in life (Musick et al. 2016; Nelson et al. 2014; Fave et al. 2013; Meier et al. 2018), “providing adults with a sense of purpose” (Nomaguchi & Milkie 2020, p.198). However, studies also point out that being a parent, especially when children are very young, involves multiple challenges including sleep deprivation, feelings of inadequateness, physical strain and social isolation (Nomaguchi & Milkie 2003). The birth of a child (especially a first child) can lead to profound insecurities among parents who find themselves unprepared in front of the major change that occurred in their lives (Luhmann et al. 2012). This can have negative repercussions also at the couple level in terms of satisfaction with one’s romantic partner (Twenge et al. 2003; Nomaguchi & Milkie 2003). The costs of raising children, the financial insecurity of many contemporary couples, and the inability to successfully combine work and family responsibilities can further exacerbate these difficulties (Busetta et al. 2019; Matysiak et al. 2016; Nomaguchi & Johnson 2009).

Therefore, from a theoretical point of view, parenthood can be both negative and positive for subjective well-being and, indeed, empirical evidence on the topic is mixed. Research for the United States, for example, finds that parents are happier than non-parents (Nelson et al. 2013; Herbst & Ifcher 2016), while for Europe, Aassve et al. (2012) and Pollmann-Schult (2014) find a positive relationship between parenthood and

happiness and life satisfaction. Longitudinal studies also indicate that the birth of a child has a positive effect on subjective well-being in Austria (Baranowska & Matysiak, 2011), the UK and Germany (Angeles, 2010; Balbo & Arpino 2016; Myrskylä & Margolis 2014) and Sweden (Switek & Easterlin 2018). In contrast, there are several studies showing no positive association whatsoever between parenthood and well-being, while others actually find parents to be worse off than childless women and men (Glass et al. 2016; Nomaguchi & Milkie 2003; Alesina et al. 2004; Mikucka & Rizzi 2019; Stanca 2012). These contrasting empirical findings are likely due, at least partially, to the great variety of research designs adopted (Nelson et al. 2014; Kohler & Mencarini 2016), which sometimes obscure several factors such as parental age, children's age, whether childlessness is voluntary or not and also the possible temporality of the positive returns of parenthood on life satisfaction and well-being (Aassve et al. 2015; Stanca 2012; Glass et al., 2016; Myrskylä & Margolis, 2014; Meier et al., 2018; Cetre et al., 2016; Hansen 2012).

Parenting, well-being and life satisfaction

While much empirical research has addressed the association between *parenthood* and well-being, albeit with mixed results, much less is known about the relationship between *parenting* and well-being. This is an important aspect to investigate given the increased popularity of parenting cultures that place great value on parental childcare time and considering the increasing time parents spend with their children (Dotti Sani and Treas 2016). Yet, very little empirical evidence on the topic is available. One early example is the study by Eggebeen & Knoester (2001) for the US, who showed that fathers who were engaged in activities with their children were more life satisfied than those who did not. But what is the theoretical mechanism linking childcare time and life satisfaction? If we think about life satisfaction as “the extent to which a person finds life rich, meaningful, full, or of high quality”², it is reasonable to assume that people who engage consistently in activities that they find enriching and full of meaning should have higher levels of life satisfaction than those who do not. Therefore, to theorize on how parenting might impact parental life satisfaction it is critical to understand how parents feel while they are with their children. If parenting entails positive emotions and a sense of meaning and satisfaction, then parents who spend a lot a time with their children might also report

²APA Dictionary of Psychology: <https://dictionary.apa.org/life-satisfaction> (last accessed July 2021)

higher levels of life satisfaction. In contrast, if childcare time is poorly valued and considered more of a pain than a gain, then we could anticipate a negative association between childcare time and life satisfaction.

To find out if childcare is considered an enjoyable activity or not, previous research has applied the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM). The DRM employs affect ratings, captured mostly through diaries, that allow testing which activities – childcare among others – are more enjoyable (Kahneman et al. 2004) and thus gauging parents' (lack of) well-being while they are with their children.

Several studies have applied the DRM to investigate which activities provide greater instantaneous enjoyment, also defined as *instant utility*, i.e. “the strength of the disposition to continue or to interrupt the current experience” (Kahneman 1999, p.4). The pioneering study by Kahneman et al. (2004) found that, among a sample of US women, childcare was among the least enjoyed activities, connotated by negative rather than positive feelings, much like paid work and housework. However, results from all later studies suggest the opposite. For example, the study by Gershuny (2013) that uses data from 1985 and 1986 for the US and the UK respectively found that childcare was rated positively by both women and men, and while it did not reach the high scores of leisure and personal care, it scored well above other activities such as unpaid work. The study by Musick et al. (2016) shows that parents in the US report higher levels of well-being in activities with their children than without them. Connelly & Kimmel (2015) show that parents report higher levels of happiness while they are engaged in some form of childcare rather than other activities. Meier et al. (2018) use time use data for the US and find that while parents enjoy time spent with their children, they report lower levels of happiness with adolescents than with younger children. Overall, these results suggest that childcare and spending time with children is something that parents enjoy and are happy while doing it. Therefore, from a theoretical point of view, it is plausible that parents who spend time with their children will report greater life satisfaction than those who do not.

A further aspect to consider is whether all parents enjoy childcare to the same extent. Indeed, some studies point out that fathers enjoy childcare and time spent with children more than mothers (Gershuny 2013), while time with children is associated with greater feelings of stress and fatigue (Musick et al. 2016) and tiredness

(Connelly & Kimmel 2015; Wang 2013) among mothers than among fathers. One possible explanation for this gender gap was proposed by Sullivan (2013, p.75), who suggests that fathers derive greater instant utility from childcare because they are involved in the better part of it: “It is known that women do more of the less enjoyable tasks within the general category of child care [...] while their partners are more likely to be involved in more interactive or fun activities with children.” If fathers enjoy childcare time more than mothers, they might also derive greater life satisfaction from it.

While studies using the DRM have shown gender differences in the instant utility derived from childcare, less is known on how other individual characteristics might matter in this respect. One characteristic that might play a major role is employment status. Given the marginal utility argument (Connelly & Kimmel 2015), parents who work–full time and therefore spend less time with their children (Shelton & John 1996) might value and enjoy childcare time more (Mittone & Savadori 2009) – and consequently derive greater life satisfaction from spending time in this activity – than parents who are employed part–time or not employed and thus have more available time. In fact, non–employed parents might enjoy childcare less because they spend too much time doing it (Kaplan 2009).

Investigating the association between life satisfaction and childcare time among parents in different working conditions is especially relevant in the Italian setting due to the large differences in employment between women and men, as well as among women in different stages of the life-course. These and other characteristics of the Italian context are detailed in the next section.

The Italian case

As mentioned, the country context is not irrelevant for the relationship between parenthood and well-being. Studies have shown that work-family policies, as well as greater economic and social support for families are related to higher well-being among fathers and, more so, mothers (Pollmann-Schult 2018; Aassve et al. 2012; Glass et al. 2016). The latter, in fact, “are more likely to be affected by country specific institutional factors,

such as labor market protection, maternity leave, and possibilities of doing part-time employment.” (Aassve et al. 2012, p.76). In this respect, Italy represents an exceptional case to elucidate the relationship between childcare time and parental well-being for at least three reasons: first, large gender inequalities characterize the country in terms of paid and unpaid work (Dotti Sani 2018; Anxo et al. 2011); second, it has a comparatively low level of state support for families with children (Esping-Andersen 1999; Saraceno 1994) and, third, the fertility rate has decidedly declined over the past few decades (Dalla Zuanna 2001; OECD 2019c).

As for the first point, much research has shown that the gender gap in domestic work, documented across the western world, is especially acute in Italy. According to OECD data, Italian women spend about 20% of their time doing domestic work on an average day, while men only 8%. For comparison, the corresponding values among both Swedish and American women and men are, respectively, 14% and 10%, while the values for Spaniards – who share a similar historical and cultural background with Italians and an equally limited welfare state – are 18% for women and 9% among men (OECD 2020). Furthermore, studies have shown that the gender gap in housework varies over the life course and is especially large among Italian parents of young children (Dotti Sani 2018; Anxo et al. 2011). To account for such large disparities in unpaid work, the different involvement of Italian women and men in the labor market is often invoked. Official statistics show that Italian women are considerably less likely to be employed than their European counterparts (OECD 2019b). Furthermore, family life appears to have a detrimental effect on Italian women’s employment status. In fact, as can be seen from Figure 1, which shows the employment rates of women (left panel) and men (right panel) by age group and family status (ISTAT 2020), shows that childless single women and men (white dots) have very similar employment rates, i.e. close to 80%, across age groups. In contrast, partnered

childless women have a lower employment rate compared to their male counterparts (grey dots), especially among the older age group. The gender gap in employment is widest among parents (black dots): while about 85% of partnered fathers in the 25 to 34 age group are employed, the figure is halved among partnered mothers (41%), reflecting the greater difficulty of young Italian women in the labor market. Indeed, employment is higher among older mothers (close to 60% in the 35–44 and 45–54 age groups) but still considerably lower than fathers' in the same age groups (which is close to 90%). These data fit well with the notion that the male–breadwinner work–family arrangement is very common among Italian couples, especially when children are present (Hook 2015; Dotti Sani & Scherer 2018).

[Figure 1 here]

Italy is also characterized by low welfare support for families with children. While maternity leave for employed mothers is comparatively generous (five months replaced at 80%), paternity leave is scant, summing up to seven days within the first five months of the birth of their child. Parental leave, whose duration varies according to which parent takes it, has a replacement rate of 30% and is taken in most cases by mothers. Public childcare for children under the age of three is underdeveloped compared to other European countries (OECD 2019d) and its availability varies greatly across regions and municipalities. The long working day of a full-time employee (9am-18pm) and the relatively low (albeit growing) availability of part-time contracts (Eurostat 2019), make work-family reconciliation a problem for Italian couples, that in many cases resort to male-breadwinning.

The difficulty in reconciling work and family is often called upon to explain the very low fertility rates of the country (Brilli et al. 2016; Del Boca et al. 2004). As noted by much of the demographic literature, fertility rates in western countries have dropped over the past decades (Lesthaeghe 2020). However, the decline has been especially dramatic in Italy, where the Total Fertility Rate (TRF) went from 2.4 children per woman in

1970 to 1.30 in 2018. Currently, Italy is among the countries with the lowest TFR in the OECD area (OECD 2019c). As Italian parents bear less and less children, the time-investments in their offspring have been increasing over the past few decades across all social strata (Dotti Sani 2020), much in line with the international literature on the topic (Gauthier et al. 2004; Gimenez Nadal & Sevilla 2012) that points toward the diffusion of new parenting styles that emphasize the importance of spending time with children for their emotional and cognitive development and well-being (Cano et al. 2019; Lareau 2003; Hsin & Felfe 2014; Kalil & Mayer 2016). As happens in other countries, the historical increase in childcare time has been larger among mothers than among fathers (Dotti Sani & Treas 2016) who are normatively expected to devote more time to their children (Hays 1996; England & Srivastava 2013).

Hypotheses

Several hypotheses can be drawn concerning the relationship between childcare time, well-being, and life satisfaction in Italy. My first set of hypotheses regards the enjoyability of childcare. Following previous literature, I anticipate that all Italian parents will enjoy childcare more than other activities. However, given the time constraints imposed on employed parents discussed above, I expect there will be differences not just between mothers and fathers, but also between employed (full time vs. part-time) and non-employed parents. Since employed mothers and fathers typically spend less time with their children compared to non-working ones (Shelton & John 1996), they might consider childcare time as *scarce*, and hence value and enjoy it more (Mittone & Savadori 2009). Accordingly, non-employed mothers might enjoy childcare less because they are “overdoing it” (Kaplan 2009). Hence, my first hypothesis is that full-time employed mothers and fathers will enjoy childcare to a greater extent than part-time employed or non-employed mothers (H1a). Moreover, as noted above, some types of childcare are arguably more enjoyable or less taxing than others (Sullivan 2013). In particular, parents might associate greater meaning to activities that involve an active child-parent interaction such as playing with or reading to children, versus feeding or settling them to sleep. Thus, I expect that all parents will enjoy interactive childcare more than physical childcare, regardless of their working status (H1b).

My second group of hypotheses regards the association between childcare time and life satisfaction. Following the same line of reasoning as above, if full-time employed fathers and mothers enjoy childcare time

more, then they should also derive more life satisfaction from it than part-time employed mothers and non-employed ones (H2a). Moreover, if interactive childcare is more enjoyable than physical care, then I would expect all parents to derive greater satisfaction from the former than from the latter, regardless of parental working status (H2b). However, because full-time employed fathers spend the least amount of time with their children in general, they might derive greater satisfaction from both interactive and physical childcare than employed mothers (both full-time and part-time) and non-employed ones (H2c).

Data, sample, variables, and method

Data and sample

The analyses are carried out on the most recent Italian Time Use Survey (ITUS), collected in 2013 and 2014 (ISTAT 2013), which provides a nationally representative sample of over 44,000 individuals living in approximately 20,000 households. All household members aged three³ and above fill in a daily time use diary covering a 24-hour period. During that period, respondents report all activities that lasted at least 10 minutes and report how pleasant each activity was, thus allowing the application of the DRM. An individual questionnaire provides background information about all members of the household that participated in the survey.

The sample for the analysis consists of a total of 4611 parents aged 25 to 54 years old living with at least one child between zero and ten years old. I restrict the sample to parents of relatively young children because childcare needs tend to diminish as children grow up, become more autonomous, and spend more time in school and in the company of people other than their parents. The sample comprises parents living in couples as well as single parents. In line with the hypotheses, summary statistics and the models are run separately for full-time employed fathers (N 2115), full-time (N 984) and part-time (N 658) employed mothers, and non-employed mothers (N 734). Due to limitations in sample sizes, part-time employed and non-employed fathers are excluded from the analysis, along with unemployed parents of both genders.

Dependent variables

³ Parents and guardians fill in the daily diary for children who cannot read and write.

To test H1a and H1b on the enjoyability of childcare time, I use the affect ratings of the various time use episodes measured in the survey. For each activity episode in the daily diary, subjects were asked to report how pleasant they found that specific time interval. The score ranged from -3 (not at all pleasant) to +3 (very pleasant). Respondents are instructed to evaluate the context as well as the activity, to account for other factors that influence their emotions (such as where the activity is taking place and with whom). These episode-specific scores have been averaged by activity to generate a single score for each respondent on each activity they engaged in on the diary day, with the aim of building measures of average pleasantness attributed to the various activities. Thus, the dependent variable in the first part of the study is the pleasantness (or the affect rating) of childcare. I use, first, a very general variable that gauges all types of direct childcare, including 1) physical care (such as feeding, giving baths, rocking to sleep, and changing diapers), 2) interactive care (reading, talking, and playing with children) and 3) educational activities (e.g., assisting with homework). Because interactive childcare (2) is arguably more meaningful and enjoyable than physical care (1), the overall variable is then broken down into these two main components to assess possible differences in the way parents feel about the different types of activities⁴. The average enjoyment scores of childcare activities among the four groups of parents are compared with the enjoyment of nine other main activities: paid work (main and secondary), housework (including cooking, cleaning and maintenance), self-care (eating/drinking, showering and other personal care), social and religious participation (volunteering, religious participation), hobbies and pastimes (including gaming, internet and social media), media consumption (reading newspapers and books, watching TV, listening to music); relax

⁴ Educational childcare activities are not explored as a separate variable because too few parents engaged in this activity and the resulting estimates are extremely uncertain.

and entertainment (includes activities such as going to the cinema or to concerts but also relaxing and doing nothing), sports and open-air leisure (all types of sports plus activities like fishing or hiking). Some subjects reported spending zero time on certain activities and in such cases it is not possible to estimate the average pleasantness. Therefore, the first part of the analysis is based on the subset of parents who spent at least ten minutes on the various activities during the diary day, as seen in other studies on the topic (Connelly & Kimmel 2015).

To test H2a, H2b and H2c on the association between childcare time and life satisfaction, I rely on a different dependent variable that measures overall life-satisfaction. Measured on a scale from 0 to 10, this measure is often used in the literature on subjective and cognitive well-being (CWB) (Nelson et al. 2014; Luhmann et al. 2012). It differs from affective well-being (AWB) that captures emotions and moods and is considered to be more enduring (Diener et al. 2013). An especially valuable characteristic of the survey is that the question about life satisfaction is asked at the *end* of the diary day. It is therefore plausible to assume that the feelings developed by the respondent in reaction to the (more or less enjoyable) activities carried out during the day will have some kind of impact on life satisfaction.

Independent variables and controls

To test whether an association exists between childcare time and life satisfaction, the main independent variables capture hours per day spent doing overall childcare, physical childcare and interactive childcare, as described in the previous section. Specifically, the overall childcare variable tests H2a, while hours in physical childcare and interactive childcare allow testing H2b and H2c. Table 1 below summarizes the hypotheses with the corresponding dependent variables.

In line with the principle of minimal marginal utility, previous studies have suggested that the more parents engage with their children, the less they gain from it (Connelly & Kimmel 2015). Therefore, the models also include a quadratic term of the different components of childcare time to account for a possible U-shaped relationship.

[Table 1 here]

To select the control variables to include in the model I adopt the approach described by Bartram (2021), according to whom: “Control variables should be selected not only by virtue of being other determinants of the outcome but also on the basis of how they relate to the core independent variable whose effect we seek to gauge. An appropriate control is a confounder – a variable that determines not only the outcome (e.g. SWB) but also the main independent variable.” Based on the literature discussed above, I include as potential confounders the number of children in the household (one as reference, two, three, four and above) and a dummy indicating whether there is a child age two or below in the household, as both are likely to affect time spent in childcare and life satisfaction. Another variable that meets the criteria is parental level of education, as it is known to be positively associated with both childcare time (Dotti Sani and Treas, 2016) and happiness and well-being (Easterlin, 2001; Yang, 2008). It is included in the models as a categorical variable with ISCED 0-1 as reference vs. ISCED 2-3 and ISCED 4/6. I also control for household type (two parent vs single parent) as single parents spend more time on childcare (being the main childcare provider) and because partnership predicts well-being (Yang, 2008). Finally, the models control for age of the parent (25-34 as reference, 35-39, 40-44, 45-54) and geographic area of residence (north as reference, center, south), which are expected to be associated only with the dependent variable and can be considered “safe” controls (Lieberson, 1985) as they do not modify the coefficient of the main independent variable. A weighting procure is applied so that the estimates refer to an average day (Carriero & Todesco 2018). Weighted summary statistics for all variables are presented in Table 2.

Models

To test H1a and H1b, linear regression models are used to estimate the level of enjoyment experienced by full-time employed fathers, full-time, part-time employed and non-employed mothers in each type of activity, including the different types of childcare⁵. To test hypotheses H2a, H2b and H2c, I run linear regression models for each group of parents where the dependent variable is life satisfaction and the main predictors are hours of overall childcare (H2a), and physical care and interactive care (H2b and H2c). Both sets of models control for the potentially confounding variables discussed above⁶.

⁵ For space limitations, only the predicted values are reported in Figure 2. The full models are available upon request.

⁶ For space limitations, only the null model and the model with controls are presented. Full models with stepwise introduction of the confounders is available in the Online Appendix.

[Table 2 here]

Results

Before moving to the results of the multivariate analyses, it is useful to consider baseline differences in life satisfaction, childcare time, and childcare enjoyment among the four groups of parents considered (see Table 2). First, employed parents are more life satisfied than non-employed mothers, a result that resonates well with previous studies especially for fathers (Schröder 2020), although the differences are quite small. Interestingly, part-time employed mothers are the most satisfied with their lives. Second, employed fathers spend less time in childcare compared to both employed and non-employed mothers, as found in previous research (Dotti Sani 2020). The childcare gap between employed parents and non-employed mothers is easily explained by invoking time availability and bargaining theories (Lyonette & Crompton 2015; Hiller 1984). In contrast, the fact that both full-time and part-time employed mothers spend more time on childcare compared to their male counterparts could be due to different ways of complying with the gender specific expectations and normative standards of parenting behavior, much like doing gender theory would predict (West & Zimmerman 1987). Interestingly, the childcare gap is concentrated in the group of less rewarding activities related to physical childcare. In fact, the average time spent on interactive childcare is the roughly the same among all four groups of parents (about 30 minutes). This finding resonates well with the argument made by Bianchi (2000) about working mothers, who appear to protect time with children by curtailing their time in other activities. In the Italian case, it appears that employed parents react to the time binds imposed by their working status by limiting the time spent in physical childcare, while securing a certain amount of time is logged into interactive care. Finally, the summary statistics suggest that fathers enjoy childcare on average more than both employed and non-employed mothers.

To test H1a and H1b, Figure 2 shows the predicted affect ratings⁷ calculated for the main activities coded in the ITUS for employed mothers and fathers and for non-employed mothers. As can be seen, there are remarkable similarities among groups: employed mothers and fathers⁸ and non-employed mothers give similar ratings of activities such as self-care, social and religious participation, entertainment, and sports. In contrast,

⁷ The average affect ratings are predicted from multivariate models that include all the controls discussed in previous section.

⁸ Affect ratings for paid work among non-employed mothers are not possible to estimate, therefore the values are calculated only for employed mothers and fathers, who evaluate paid work to roughly the same extent.

employed mothers enjoy housework somewhat less than employed fathers and non-employed mothers, while the latter show a much higher appreciation for time spent in hobbies and pastimes.

Several interesting findings emerge regarding the enjoyment of childcare time. First, it appears that Italian parents do not dislike childcare at all, as the average affect ratings for this activity are higher compared to most of the other activities. However, employed fathers enjoy doing childcare considerably more than their employed or non-employed partners, suggesting that fathers are possibly more “time hungry” than mothers and enjoy spending time with their children more. Furthermore, it is worth noting that interactive childcare ranks the highest in terms of enjoyment for employed fathers (nearly 2.5) and is among the most appreciated activities also for mothers, close to sports and entertainment. In contrast, the ratings for physical childcare are considerably lower, especially for mothers, although they do not reach the lowest levels of (non)enjoyment derived paid and unpaid work. Therefore, it appears that my first hypothesis (H1a) is only partially confirmed: employed fathers enjoy childcare more than non-employed mothers but employed mothers do not appear to have the same advantage as employed fathers. In other words, the “scarcity hypothesis” applies more to working fathers than to working mothers. In contrast, H1b is fully confirmed: all parents enjoy interactive childcare more than physical childcare.

[Figure 2 here]

Moving to the second set of hypotheses, we turn to the results of the multivariate models presented in Table 3 to test whether there is an association between parents’ time on childcare and life satisfaction (see the Online Appendix for the complete set of models). The results for employed fathers support the initial expectations, as the coefficient for overall childcare time is positive and significant ($\beta=0.18$, $p\leq.01$). However, when we break the childcare variable in its two main components, we can see that the result is driven by time in physical care ($\beta=0.28$, $p\leq.01$), while the coefficient for interactive childcare time is positive but smaller and not statistically significant ($\beta=0.11$, $p>.10$). Thus, it appears that employed fathers who spend more time with their children do have higher life satisfaction, but the returns derive from physical rather than interactive care. The results for full time employed mothers are quite different. First,

the coefficient in the null model is considerably larger than the one in the model with controls ($\beta=0.28$, $p\leq.001$ vs $\beta=0.15$, $p\leq.05$), indicating that one of the control variables is indeed a confounder. As shown in the Online Appendix, it is the presence of a child between 0 and 2 years old that increases both (physical) childcare time and life satisfaction. Above this important difference, in both the null model and the one with controls, the coefficient for overall childcare time is positive and statistically significant. However, what seems to matter the most for mothers' life satisfaction is time spent in interactive childcare ($\beta=0.44$, $p\leq.001$), as the coefficient for physical childcare is positive but not significant ($\beta=0.07$, $p>.10$) once the controls are included. The coefficients for part-time employed mothers, in contrast, are all not statistically significant, possibly due to the smaller sample size. Similarly, the coefficients for non-employed mothers indicate no association between childcare time and life satisfaction: the coefficients for general and physical care are close to zero and non-significant, while the coefficient for interactive care is negative and non-significant.

[Table 3 here]

How do these findings map against the hypotheses? The results provide some evidence in support of the “scarcity” argument, in that we find a positive association between childcare time and life satisfaction among full-time employed but not among part-time employed and non-employed mothers. Hence, H2a appears to be confirmed. In contrast, hypotheses H2b stated that the positive relationship between childcare time and life satisfaction would be stronger for interactive rather than physical childcare activities, being the former more meaningful (Sullivan 2013). However, the coefficients from the models suggested that this is not the case. To provide a clearer picture of the magnitude of the effects, Figure 3 plots the predicted values of life satisfaction by time spent in interactive childcare (top panels) and in physical care (bottom panels) for the four groups of parents, estimated from the models with controls in Table 3. Starting from the top panel, we can see that the positive association between interactive care and life satisfaction is strongest among full-time employed mothers compared to other parents. A modest positive association emerges also among full-time

employed fathers and, less so, part-time employed mothers, while the slope is substantially flat for non-employed mothers. The lower panel, instead, shows that the association between physical childcare and life satisfaction is largest among full-time employed fathers. Life satisfaction is also somewhat higher at higher values of physical childcare among full-time employed mothers, but not significantly so. In contrast, we find no association between life satisfaction and physical childcare among part-time employed and non-employed mothers alike. Thus, contrary to H2b, it appears that interactive childcare matters more than physical childcare for life satisfaction only for employed mothers. Our results also bring some support for H2c, as among fathers we observe a positive association between both types of childcare and life satisfaction, although the slope is flatter for interactive care compared to mothers.

[Figure 3 here]

Conclusions

Much previous research has addressed the relationship between parenthood and life satisfaction, both in cross-national and in longitudinal perspective (Nelson et al. 2013; Herbst & Ifcher 2016; Aassve et al. 2012; Radó 2020; Ugur 2020; Balbo & Arpino 2016; Baranowska & Matysiak 2011; Pollmann-Schult 2014). Given its intrinsic importance, it is not surprising that the puzzle has garnered the interest of researchers from multiple disciplines. However, beyond differences in country context and methodology, most previous studies have addressed the issue by framing parenthood as a status (i.e. being a parent), or an event (i.e. becoming a parent), rather than considering the actual act of parenting and its relationship with life satisfaction.

This article provides a unique contribution to the literature by assessing the association between parental childcare time, well-being and life satisfaction among parents with different levels of labour market involvement in Italy. Specifically, it makes three contributions to the literature. First, the article pushes the field forward by asking a) whether Italian parents enjoy childcare and b) whether there is an association between time spent in childcare (i.e. parenting) and a measure of parental subjective and cognitive well-being: life satisfaction. Due to large inequalities in parental childcare time between genders (Chesley & Flood 2017; Sullivan et al. 2014) and across social strata (Sayer et al. 2004; Guryan et al. 2008), assessing whether and to what extent childcare time is associated with different levels of enjoyment and life satisfaction is a critical step to uncover inequalities in subjective well-being among parents. The advantage of looking at the relationship

between life satisfaction and parenting time, rather than the parenthood as a status or an event, is that childcare can be modified (both in quantity and in quality) in order to maximize its benefits. In other words, while a parent can decide (at least to some extent) to step up or downsize her childcare time based on how this activity makes her feel, she cannot stop being a parent and forego completely the incumbencies of parental life; at the same time, there are numerous constraints (among others, financial, time- and health-related) that make having additional children a less feasible option compared to increasing childcare. Hence, by pinpointing the association between parenting and well-being, we enable parents to be proactive in the management of their well-being. Second, the article focuses on a country, Italy, that is known for its low levels of gender equality at the societal level, where women are overrepresented in the private, domestic field and underrepresented in the public sphere, in particular in the labor market. Owing to a welfare state that relies heavily on women to shoulder domestic work and care responsibilities (Saraceno 1994), Italian mothers are at the forefront in taking responsibility for their children and spend considerable more time on childcare compare to Italian fathers. Hence, the question of whether childcare time is enjoyable and relates to life satisfaction is especially relevant in a context such as the Italian one. Finally, the article contributes to the debate on inequalities in subjective well-being by arguing that the value of childcare time for life satisfaction is contingent on the amount of time parents can devote to this activity. Indeed, the results indicated the among four groups of parents (full-time employed fathers, full-time employed mothers, part-time employed mothers, and non-employed mothers) full-time employed parents gained the most from childcare time, bringing support to the scarcity hypothesis (Mittone & Savadori 2009).

There are some limitations to the study that must be acknowledged. The first, and most relevant, is that given the cross-sectional nature of the ITUS data, it is not possible to assess causality in the association between childcare time and life satisfaction. Indeed, it could be argued that reverse causation is at play and that parents who are more life satisfied prefer spending time with their children compared to those who are less satisfied. It is also possible than some underlying, unobserved variable might account for both life satisfaction and childcare time. Whether this is the case is impossible to test with the current data. However, additional analyses (see Figure A1 in the Online Appendix) suggest that the way subjects spend their time has some relationship with the way they feel about their life. For example, additional models showed that working overtime or spending a lot of time on housework is associated with lower life satisfaction: in both cases, reverse causation

seems implausible. Similarly, while unobserved characteristics might account for the positive association between life satisfaction and childcare time, it is harder to think about unobservable characteristics that would increase the propensity to do housework and lower life satisfaction. Moreover, parents who spend more time in pleasant activities (such as leisure) report higher levels of life satisfaction. Overall, the results suggest the existence of positive and negative relationships between the way people spend their time and life satisfaction.

An additional question is whether the results account for day-to-day variations in childcare time and life satisfaction (i.e., that spending more childcare on a given day would provide an *instantaneous* effect on life satisfaction) or if they point to a more stable association between the two (i.e., spending time on childcare *regularly* is positively associated with overall life satisfaction). The two options are not mutually exclusive, and the data do not allow us to provide a definite answer. If life satisfaction is relatively stable from one day to the next, as suggested in the literature (Diener et al., 2013), it seems more plausible that at least for full-time employed parents having regular-to-large doses of childcare in their daily routine is positive for their life satisfaction. However, studies have also shown the importance of positive and negative daily events for satisfaction with life (Maher et al. 2015; Bourke et al. 2021). Therefore, further research is needed to assess the time-variant vs time invariant effect of childcare on life-satisfaction.

Two further limitations could also be addressed in future research. First, non-employed fathers are not considered in the analysis due to small sample size, reflecting the fact that this group represents a minority in the Italian population. Nonetheless, it would be worth investigating the patterns of life satisfaction and childcare also in this minority. Second, while the focus on the Italian case has the merit of providing information on an understudied topic in a context with limited family welfare and low gender equality, the results cannot be generalized beyond the Italian population. Therefore, further research is needed to investigate the association between parenting and life satisfaction in other western and non-western countries.

In conclusion, do Italian parents benefit spending time with their children? The answer is yes, but not all of them. Indeed, the findings show that Italian mothers and fathers do enjoy childcare, especially its interactive component, regardless of their employment status. Hence, in line with previous studies from other countries, childcare is found to be among the most enjoyed activities. However, despite its pleasantness, only full-time employed parents experience positive returns in life satisfaction for each additional hour of childcare. In

contrast, among part-time employed and non-employed mothers there is virtually no association between childcare time and life satisfaction.

This inequality in life satisfaction that emerges among parents at the intersection of gender and employment status is troubling from at least two perspectives. On the one hand, finding that part-time employed and non-employed mothers do not reap much benefit from childcare when they are, by definition, more centered on the domestic sphere of their life and lack the stimuli and gratifications that can come from paid employment, suggests that these mothers might be significantly hindered in their pursuit of happiness, self-fulfillment, and well-being. On the other hand, while it is clear from previous research that children benefit from parental time, it is legitimate to ask whether parents also benefit from spending time with their children. The fact that part-time employed and non-employed mothers do not benefit from childcare time should raise questions about the long-term sustainability of an ever-increasing childcare load, dictated by the culture of “concerted cultivation” (Lareau 2003) and “intensive motherhood” (Hays 1996), at least for these categories of mothers.

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Figure 1. Employment rates by gender, age group and family status (ISTAT 2020)

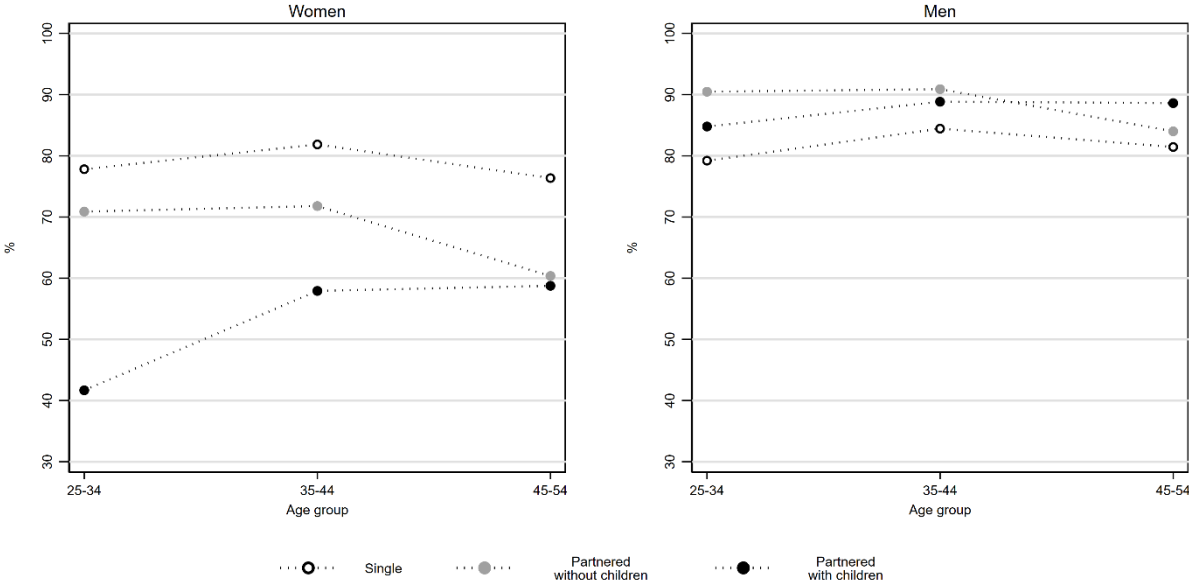
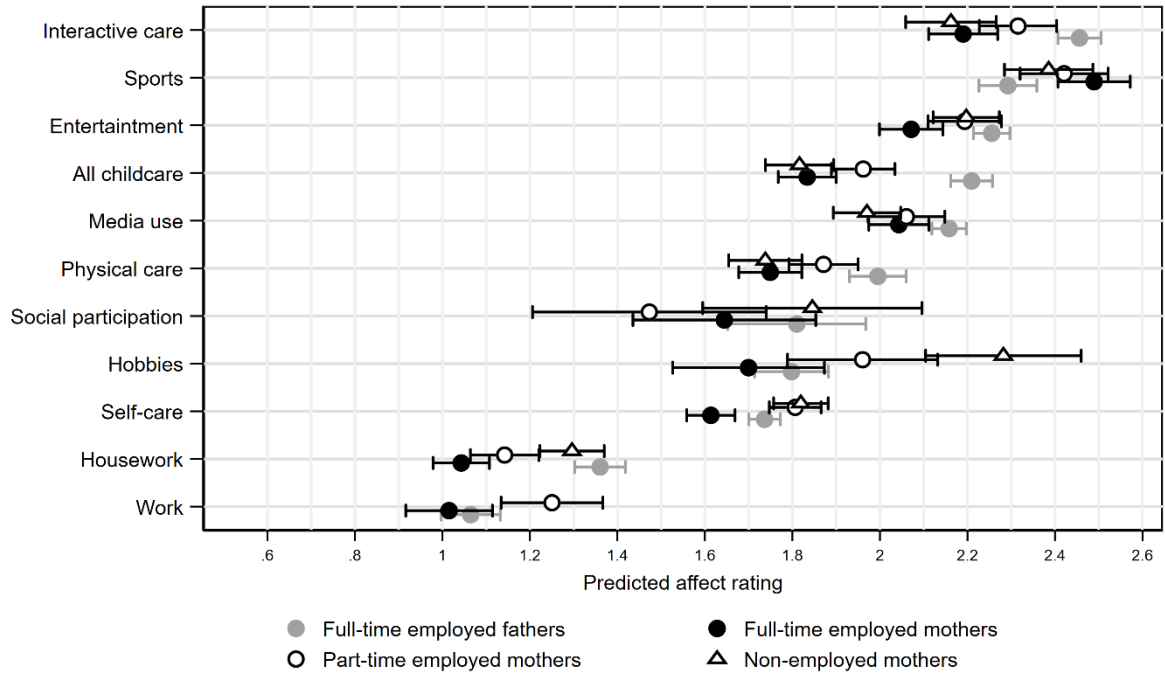
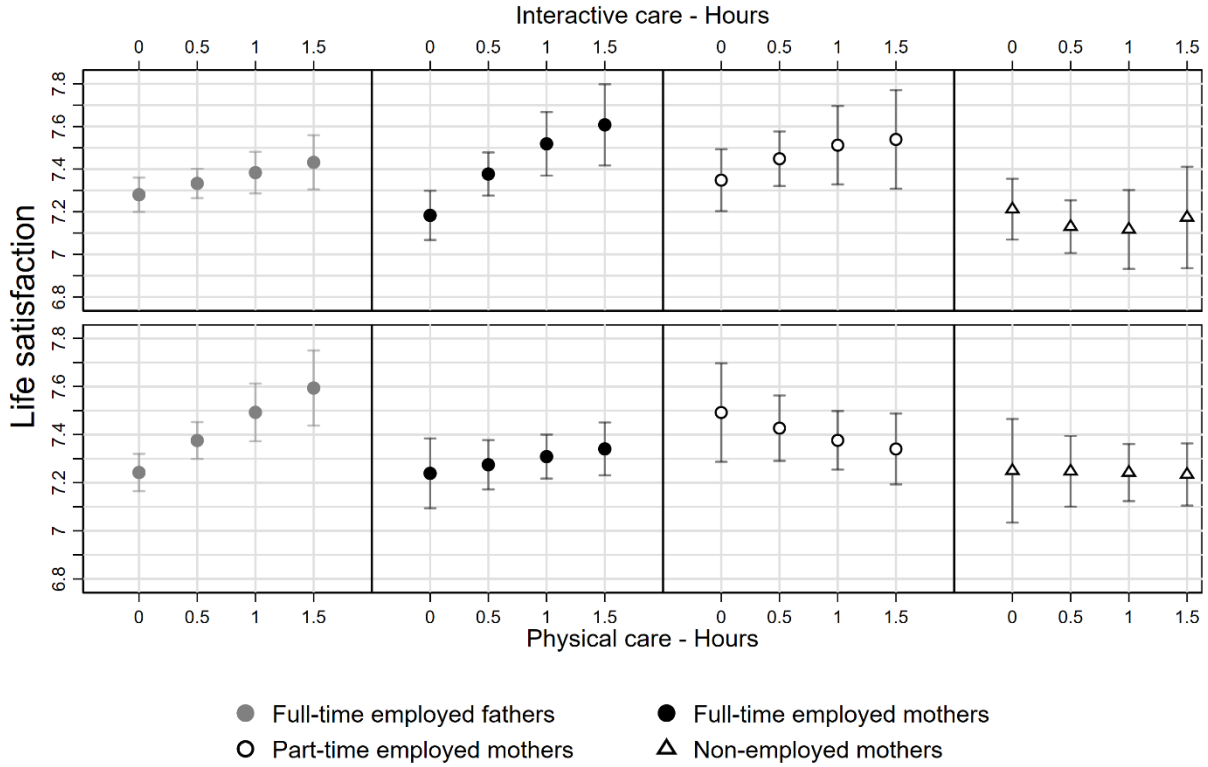


Figure 2: Predicted affect ratings with 95% confidence intervals for main activities among employed mothers and fathers and non-employed mothers. Source: own calculation on ITUS data (2013/14). Weighted.



The predictions are derived from multivariate models (not shown for space limitations) that control for: the number of children in the household; presence of a child below the age of two; parental level of education; household type (two parent vs single parent); age of the parent; geographic area of residence.

Figure 3. Predicted values of life satisfaction with 95% confidence intervals by time spent in interactive childcare and in physical care among employed mothers and fathers and non-employed mothers. Source: own calculation on ITUS data. Weighted.



Predictions were obtained from the models presented in Table 3 that control for: the number of children in the household; presence of a child below the age of two; parental level of education; household type (two parent vs single parent); age of the parent; geographic area of residence.

Table 1. Hypotheses summary

Dependent variable: childcare affect rating (min=-3 “not at all pleasant”; max =+3 “very pleasant”)

H1a	Full-time employed mothers and fathers enjoy childcare to a greater extent than part-time employed or non-employed mothers.
H1b	All parents enjoy interactive childcare more than physical childcare, regardless of their working status

Dependent variable: life satisfaction (min=0; max =10)

H2a	Full-time employed fathers and mothers derive more life satisfaction from childcare time than part-time employed and non-employed mothers.
H2b	All parents derive greater satisfaction from interactive childcare than from physical childcare, regardless of their working status
H2c	Full-time employed fathers derive greater satisfaction from both interactive and physical childcare compared to employed mothers (both full-time and part-time) and non-employed ones.

Table 2. Main dependent and independent variables by gender and employment status. Source: own calculation on ITUS data (2013/14). Weighted.

	Mean	Sd	Min	Max	N
<i>Full-time employed fathers</i>					
Satisfaction with life	7.33	1.50	0	10	
Minutes childcare	56.24	70.88	0	670	2,115
Minutes physical care	22.96	42.22	0	580	
Minutes interactive care	30.02	47.11	0	480	
Childcare affect rating	2.21	0.93	-3	3	1,377
<i>Full-time employed mothers</i>					
Satisfaction with life	7.31	1.50	0	10	
Minutes childcare	108.34	107.31	0	770	984
Minutes physical care	71.00	90.49	0	770	
Minutes interactive care	29.08	45.28	0	390	
Childcare affect rating	1.83	1.01	-3	3	820
<i>Part-time employed mothers</i>					
Satisfaction with life	7.40	1.48	1	10	
Minutes childcare	115.77	97.98	0	550	658
Minutes physical care	73.18	74.70	0	500	
Minutes interactive care	31.71	49.28	0	380	
Childcare affect rating	1.96	0.89	-3	3	550
<i>Non-employed mothers</i>					
Satisfaction with life	7.22	1.56	1	10	
Minutes childcare	139.06	103.74	0	550	734
Minutes physical care	90.36	85.65	0	520	
Minutes interactive care	30.92	49.36	0	320	
Childcare affect rating	1.82	1.01	-3	3	623

%	<i>Full-time employed fathers</i>	<i>Full-time employed mothers</i>	<i>Part-time employed mothers</i>	<i>Non-employed mothers</i>
<i>Age group</i>				
25-34	17.22	23.78	24.52	39.88
35-39	25.70	30.08	32.62	27.28
40-44	31.28	33.66	32.50	22.28
45-54	25.80	12.48	10.38	10.58
<i>Number of children</i>				
One	41.22	48.48	43.26	34.82
Two	45.64	43.34	44.66	45.98
Three	11.02	6.68	11.42	15.62
≥ Four	2.12	1.50	0.66	3.58
<i>Level of education</i>				
ISCED 0-1	38.10	14.66	26.86	51.74
ISCED 2-3	43.42	46.48	45.38	39.06
ISCED 4-6	18.46	38.86	27.76	9.20
<i>Area</i>				
North	51.52	51.58	61.66	36.08
Center	19.82	23.74	20.82	16.72
South	28.68	24.68	17.52	47.20
<i>Household type</i>				
Two parents	99.18	85.12	89.16	95.32
Single parent	0.82	14.88	10.84	4.68

Baby 0-2

33.14

31.02

26.56

34.66

Table 3. Linear regression models predicting life satisfaction. Parents aged 25 to 54 and with at least one child aged 0-10. Standard errors in parentheses. Weighted.

	Full-time employed fathers (N=2115)				Full-time employed mothers (N=984)			
	Hypothesis 2a		Hypotheses 2b and 2c		Hypotheses 2a		Hypotheses 2b and 2c	
	<i>Null</i>	<i>With controls</i>	<i>Null</i>	<i>With controls</i>	<i>Null</i>	<i>With controls</i>	<i>Null</i>	<i>With controls</i>
All childcare	0.21*** (0.06)	0.18** (0.06)			0.28*** (0.06)	0.15* (0.06)		
All childcare sq.	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)			-0.02** (0.01)	-0.01+ (0.01)		
Interactive care			0.14+ (0.08)	0.11 (0.08)			0.42** (0.13)	0.44*** (0.13)
Interactive care sq.			-0.02 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)			-0.09* (0.04)	-0.11* (0.04)
Physical care			0.32** (0.10)	0.28** (0.10)			0.26*** (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)
Physical care sq.			-0.04 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)			-0.02* (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Log-likelihood	-3844.90	-3812.95	-3842.18	-3810.65	-1780.33	-1726.56	-1774.37	-1722.10
Sig.	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	Part-time employed mothers (N=658)				Non-employed mothers (N=734)			
	Hypothesis 2a		Hypotheses 2b and 2c		Hypothesis 2a		Hypotheses 2b and 2c	
	<i>Null</i>	<i>With controls</i>	<i>Null</i>	<i>With controls</i>	<i>Null</i>	<i>With controls</i>	<i>Null</i>	<i>With controls</i>
All childcare	0.13 (0.09)	0.12 (0.09)			0.09 (0.09)	0.04 (0.09)		
All childcare sq.	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)			-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)		
Interactive care			0.39* (0.16)	0.24 (0.16)			-0.20 (0.17)	-0.23 (0.16)
Interactive care sq.			-0.11* (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)			0.13* (0.05)	0.14** (0.05)
Physical care			-0.21+ (0.11)	-0.14 (0.12)			0.07 (0.10)	-0.00 (0.11)
Physical care sq.			0.04+ (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)			-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Log-likelihood	-1188.28	-1170.14	-1184.68	-1169.17	-1367.63	-1325.50	-1362.57	-1318.46
Sig.	0.35	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.14	0.00	0.01	0.00

Note: r.c. = reference category. + $p \leq 0.10$; * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$. The controls included in the models are the number of children in the household; presence of a child below the age of two; parental level of education; household type (two parent vs single parent); age of the parent; geographic area of residence.
