

How much time with children is enough? Actual childcare time and subjective perceptions across European countries

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Introduction

In most Western countries, parents' time spent in childcare has increased over recent decades (Bianchi 2000; Dotti Sani and Treas 2016; Gauthier, Smeeding and Furstenberg 2004). This increase has largely been explained by changing standards of motherhood and fatherhood. The demands on motherhood to support their children's development and achievements have become higher and more time-intensive (Hays 1996; Sandberg and Hofferth 2001; Sayer, Bianchi and Robinson 2004) and fathers are increasingly expected to be present and engaged (Hobson 2002). Against these high standards, around one-half of parents in the United States and of employed parents in Canada think that they do not spend enough time with their children (Milkie et al. 2004; Milkie, Nomaguchi and Schieman 2019). Subjective time scarcity is more prevalent among fathers than mothers, with adolescents and among parents with higher working hours (Milkie et al. 2004). However, there is a lack of cross-national research on parents' subjective perceptions of time with their children, which would allow for a window into contextual effects on time deficits. Newly available survey data allows us to address felt time deficits with children for 31 countries. Our study is based on the fourth wave of the European Quality of Life Surveys (EQLS) 2016/17, which includes – for the first time – questions both on whether parents spend as much time or less time than they would like caring for their children as well as how many hours per week they spend on childcare.

Research questions

This paper addresses the following research questions:

- What share of parents think that they do not spend enough time with their children?
- How does this perception depend on actual time spent with children and on parents' characteristics (such as gender or employment)?
- How can we explain cross-country differences in parents' subjective perceptions of childcare time?

Data and methods

Our analysis is based on the fourth wave of the European Quality of Life Survey conducted in 2016. This survey of 28 EU-countries and 5 candidate countries (Albania, FYR of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey) focuses on quality of life, quality of society and public services (2018). It covers adults aged 18+ and contains around 1,000-2,000 respondents per country.

The 2016 wave included, for the first time, questions both on parents' objective time with children and feelings about whether they spend enough or too little time with their children. The subjective assessment of time with children is measured by the following question: "Could you tell me if you spend as much time as you would like *caring for children or grandchildren*, or if you wish you could spend 'less time' or 'more time' in that activity? Spend less time; spend as much time as I currently do; spend more time." Actual time spent with children is measured as follows: "In general how often are you involved in *caring for and/or educating your children*? Every day; several days a week; once or twice a week; less often; never." Respondents who gave one of the first three answers were asked for the weekly hours: "On average, how many hours per week are you involved in *caring for and/or educating your children*?" If respondents answered to the first question on the involvement with 'less often' (than once or twice a week) or 'never', the question on weekly hours was recoded with zero. We acknowledge that the measurement of hours per week with childcare based on a retrospective measure and not on diary entries is a main caveat of this data set (Gershuny 2000; Juster and Stafford 1991; Schulz and Grunow 2012). Our analytical sample consists of respondents who had children below age 18 in the household. The sample size is 6,929 cases in 31 countries (excluding Portugal and Montenegro due to very high shares of missing values).

We estimated multilevel linear probability models using feelings about time with children as dependent variable. All models were estimated separately for fathers and mothers. We combined 'spend less time' (5%) and 'spend as much time as I currently do' (52%) versus 'spend more time' (43%); thus our dependent variable is (0) 'enough time' and (1) 'too little time'. The following independent micro-level variables were included: gender, age of the youngest child, work hours, family structure, level of education, number of children below age 18 in the household. As macro-level variables, we considered part-time rate (for mothers), mean actual working hours (for men), time flexibility (working hours set by employees or company; for all parents) and gender roles (for all parents).

Expected findings

Preliminary results show that across countries around 25% to 60% of mothers and about 40% to 70% of fathers perceive the time they have with their children as not enough. Pooling all countries, we find that subjective time with children is scarcer among fathers than mothers, with younger children (only among fathers), among parents with longer working hours and among parents who spend less time with their children. Gender differences are mainly due to differences in working hours: around 50% of full-time employed mothers and fathers feel that they do not spend enough time with their children compared to 30% among mothers and fathers in part-time positions. In line with US results (Milkie et al. 2004), we also find that the effect of working hours remains significant even after controlling for actual time with childcare. Seemingly, parents' employment matters beyond curtailing their time with children, possibly restricting parents' ability to be present at certain important times and events (e.g., meal time, school events, sporting events). Multilevel models reveal, moreover, that subjective scarcity of childcare time is more pronounced for mothers and fathers in countries with little flexibility in working time.

The significance of the study is two-fold. First, this study for the first time empirically expands assessments of parents' time deficits with children—arguably a strain in one of the most, or the most important relationship in their lives—to the European context. Second, the study is able to extend theories of time stress and parents' well-being, through elucidating contextual-level conditions that shape parents' feelings, beyond their actual time spent with children, and individual work-family conditions.

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