

Heterogeneities in attitudes towards maternal and paternal working hours across the family life cycle: Evidence from the German FReDA panel

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Background

In highly developed countries, the gender revolution instigated a transition from the traditional breadwinner model towards the dual-earner model, including changing gender role attitudes (Panova & Buber-Ennsner, 2016; Schober & Scott, 2012), an increase in maternal employment participation (Thévenon, 2013) and institutional changes in labour markets and family policy (Lewis, 2016; Pfau-Effinger, 2012). However, diagnoses of the gender revolution assess it as being “incomplete” (Esping-Andersen, 2009) or “uneven” and “stalled” (England, 2010). While the female emancipation resulted in women and mothers increasingly participating in the public sphere and the labour market, the second half of the gender revolution – the involvement of men in care and homework – has been deferred (Goldscheider et al., 2015). Moreover, the rise in maternal labour force participation has been highly concentrated in part-time employment, whereby inequalities in the division of labour persist.

With regard to attitudes towards gender roles, a strong increase in egalitarian and a decrease in traditional views can be observed internationally as well as in Germany (Ebner et al., 2020; Lois, 2020). However, heterogeneities can be observed when attitudes toward specific dimensions of the public and private life are analysed separately (Grunow et al., 2018; Knight & Brinton, 2017).

With this study, we want to address the discrepancy between the measured egalitarian attitudes towards maternal employment and the still unequal division of labour among parental couples. We exploit a new indicator, which measures attitudes toward parental employment in a concrete, differentiated, comparable way and along the family cycle. One of the key strengths of this indicator is that it measures the ideal parental work involvement in a metric way in the form of weekly working hours. This allows us to differentiate between different extents of part time work, which range from a near full-time load of 30 hours to marginal jobs of 5 or 10 hours a week. Additionally, the indicator measures these attitudes across the family life cycle, that is, by different ages of the youngest child.

Data and methods

We use data from the first wave of the representative German study ‘Family Research and Demographic Analysis (FReDA)’ from 2021 (Bujard et al., 2023, Schneider et al. 2021). We restricted the sample to respondents aged 18-49 who (also) have German citizenship (N= 18.354).

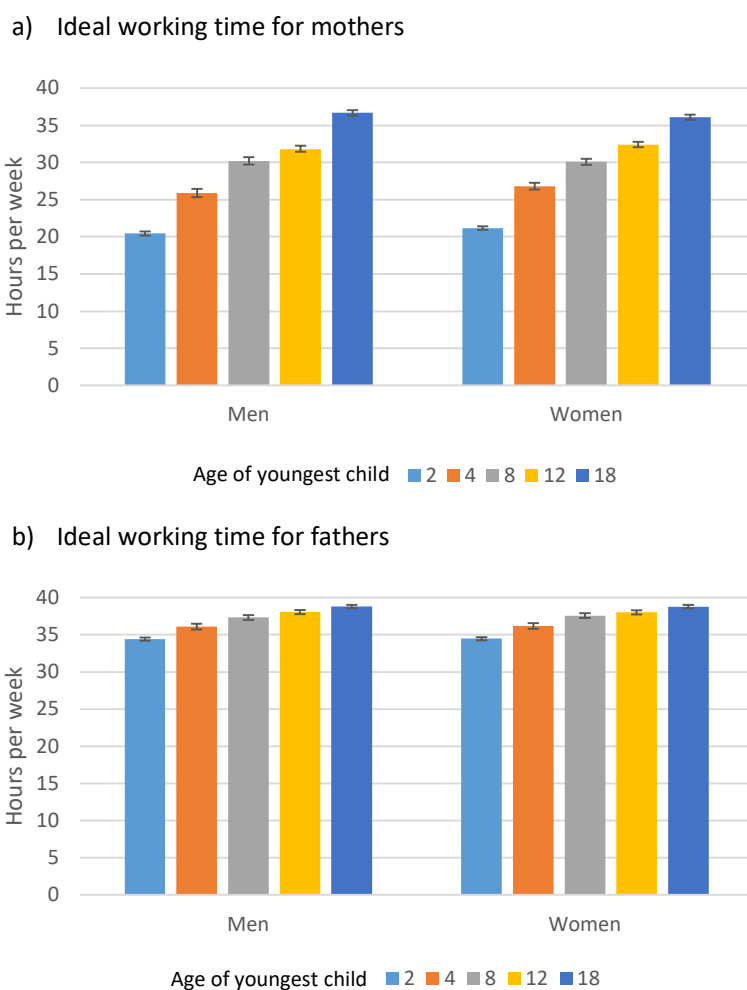
Respondents’ attitudes on the ideal work involvement of mothers and fathers were collected in FReDA via two consecutive questions. The first question was: “Consider a family with a mother, father and two children where the youngest child is two years old. Should the mother work full-time, part-time or not at all?” All respondents received this question. In addition, each respondent was asked to assess a similar scenario but with a different age of the youngest child, which was (randomly) set to 4, 8, 12, or 18-years. The respondents each gave their attitude on the ideal working time for mothers as well as for fathers. If respondents answered this first question with “part-time” they then were asked for the concrete number of working hours per week the mother or father should work.

We provide descriptive statistics on the ideal number of working hours for mothers and fathers across the family life cycle and compare them with the average real working time of mothers and fathers. These analyses are weighted to adjust for the sampling design and reduce bias due to non-response. Furthermore, we estimate (unweighted) multivariate linear regression models to investigate which respondents, in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, support a higher number of working hours for mothers and fathers.

Ideal working time for parents

Our analysis shows systematic variations in the working time respondents consider to be ideal for parents by the family life cycle. The ideal working time is lower when the youngest child is two years old and increases incrementally until the child is 18 years old. However, this trend across the life cycle varies between mothers and fathers: The ideal working time for mothers averages 20.8 hours (CI 20.6; 21.0) per week when the youngest children is two years old and increases to 26.3 hours (CI 26.0; 26.7) when the youngest child is 4 years old, 30.1 hours (CI 29.8; 30.5) when the youngest child is 8 years old; 32.1 (CI 31.8; 32.4) hours when the youngest child is 12 years old and 36.4 hours per week (CI 36.1; 36.6) when the youngest child is 18 years old. The differences between the mean ideal working times by age of the youngest child are statistically significant. These attitudes towards maternal employment hardly differ by the sex of the respondent (Figure 1a).

Figure 1: Ideal working time for parents expressed by male and female respondents



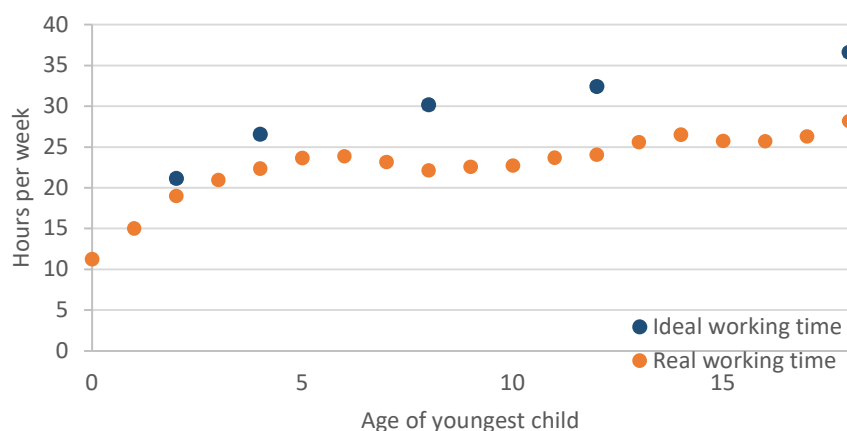
Source: FReDA wave 1 (2021).

The working time considered ideal for fathers averaged 34.4 hours (CI 34.3; 34.6) per week when the youngest child is two years old and increases to 36.1 hours (CI 35.9; 36.4) when the youngest child is 4 years old and 37.4, 38.2 and 38.8 when the youngest child is 8, 12 or 18 years old, respectively. The appraisal of father's ideal working hours is nearly identical between male and female respondents (Figure 1b).

Ideal and actual working time compared

The number of working hours considered ideal for mothers and the hours actually worked per week by mothers diverge more strongly with the increasing age of the child. While for a mother with a 2-year-old child, a labour force participation of 21.1 hours per week is considered ideal, the mothers in the sample work an average of 19.0 hours. When the youngest child is four years old, and more than half of the mothers have returned to the labour market, the difference between ideal (26.6) and actual (22.3) working hours is already four hours; with school-aged children this difference amount eight hours and even with an adult child there is a discrepancy of still eight hours between ideal (36.6) and real (28.2) working hours per week. Thus, what is considered the ideal amount of work for mothers increases significantly over the course of the family cycle to almost full-time work, while the actual amount of work also increases, but at a much lower pace.

Figure 2: Ideal and real working time for mothers



Source: FReDA wave 1 (2021).

Factors predicting the ideal working time of mothers

Table 1 shows preliminary results from the multivariate analyses on the ideal working time for mothers by the age of the youngest child for all scenarios of 2, 4, 8, 12, and 18 years. In contrast to the descriptive findings, there are significant differences by respondents' sex. Women support a higher working time for mothers than men, in particular for children aged 2 and 4 years. Respondents with higher education consider more working hours as ideal for children aged 2 and 8 years. Older respondents consider fewer working hours as ideal for all five scenarios of ages of the youngest child. Most striking are the differences by region: Both variables, born in East Germany and currently living in East Germany have each a strong significant association with higher working hour ideals compared to their West German counterparts. However, these differences can only be observed when the child is relatively young, i.e. for scenarios of ages 8 years or less.

Several associations are similar for scenarios with children aged 2-8 years but not for older children: Respondents with school-aged children (6-17) have lower working hour ideals for scenarios with children aged 2-8 years. Respondents who often work from home have higher working hour ideals for scenarios with children aged 2-8 years. The association with income is very small and only significant for the scenario with a two-year-old child.

Discussion

Utilising unique new data from the FReDA Panel, we show how the weekly working time considered to be ideal for parents evolves as the children grow up. These attitudes can help predictive the specific employment potential of parents, and particularly mothers, over the family life cycle.

Table 1: Ideal working time for mothers by age of youngest child (YC)

	(1) YC 2	(2) YC 4	(3) YC 8	(4) YC 12	(5) YC 18
Women	1.560**	1.286**	0.742*	0.445 ⁺	0.203
Educational level (ref.=less than secondary)					
Secondary	1.042*	-0.729	1.018	0.730	0.723
Post secondary	1.073*	-2.086 ⁺	0.939	0.344	1.296
Bachelor	1.607**	-1.044	2.225*	0.045	1.266
Master/PhD	3.660**	0.603	3.894**	-0.092	2.007*
Age (ref. = 18-29 years)					
30-39 years	-1.473**	-1.728**	-1.666**	0.038	-1.034**
40-50 years	-2.876**	-2.838**	-2.695**	-0.354	-0.866*
Born abroad	0.577 ⁺	1.238*	0.844	0.186	-0.661
Living in East-Germany	5.091**	4.432**	3.073**	-0.010	0.529
Born in East-Germany	5.900**	4.828**	3.748**	0.872**	0.747 ⁺
Very religious	-4.322**	-3.250**	-2.470**	0.040	-1.574**
Age of youngest child (ref. = no child aged <18)					
0-2 years	0.378	-0.684	-0.936 ⁺	0.340	-0.626
3-5 years	-0.512	-0.620	-1.500**	0.741*	-0.542
6-10 years	-1.160**	-1.589*	-1.599**	0.511	-1.317**
11-17 years	-1.527**	-0.625	-2.655**	0.697 ⁺	-1.399*
Employment status (ref.= full-time employed)					
Part-time work	-1.874**	-1.717**	-2.665**	-1.314**	-2.151**
Unemployed	-0.730	-1.117	0.829	-0.285	-0.315
Not employed	-2.429**	-1.961**	-1.024 ⁺	-1.061**	-1.132*
Constant	21.278**	28.714**	30.076**	37.900**	36.112**
N	17,357	3,841	3,806	3,838	3,897
r2	0.163	0.136	0.131	0.038	0.047

Note: Controlled for household income, health limitations, occupational professions, partner's educational level, home-office, social support (not shown). ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Source: FReDA wave 1 (2021).

The marked difference between East and West Germans reveals the relevance of two factors: The fact that respondents born in East Germany support a higher number of working hours for mothers than those born in West Germany shows that socialisation plays a role for higher maternal working hour ideals. But in addition to that, the region currently lived in matters, highlighting the supportive role of the East-German infrastructure of full-day childcare and schools.

Related to the secular shift towards an egalitarian dual earner model, our study reveals that working norms are still very different towards mothers and fathers. Fathers are supposed to work full-time throughout the course of their children growing up. Only a small reduction of ideal working time is found when their youngest child is two years old. This challenges egalitarian attitudes towards fathers in some surveys and confirms the diagnoses of the gender revolution theoreticians that it is stalled regarding the role of the men (England, 2010; Esping-Andersen, 2009; Goldscheider et al., 2015).

For mothers, the findings show that a steady increase in working time up to almost full-time employment is seen as ideal, whereby the actual working hours often remain low. Thus, since the strongest redistribution of gainful employment within parental couples is desired in the early childhood phase, in the sense that fathers reduce their work and mothers increase theirs, policies and employers should support greater participation in unpaid work by fathers.

Next steps of our paper are to continue multivariate analyses for the ideal working time for fathers and additional independent variables.

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