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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTION OF PARENTING TIME

Marina Zannella, Alessandra De Rose

1. Introduction

The rise of dual-earner couples together with the emergence of more time demanding jobs are among the factors that have contributed to squeeze individuals' and families' time. Nevertheless, existing studies have shown that today's parents are devoting more time to children than what they did decades ago (Gauthier *et al.*, 2004). The upward trend in childcare time has been accompanied by a cultural shift towards more time-intensive and child-centered parenting (Craig *et al.*, 2014). Busier parents have adapted to the changing rhythms of family life by becoming increasingly multitasking to preserve their time with children (Bianchi *et al.*, 2006).

The significant change in the context and meaning of parenting that has taken place in recent decades has called the attention of scholars on aspects related to mothers' and fathers' wellbeing. While flourishing literature has shown lower levels of subjective wellbeing among parents compared to childless people (e.g. Aassve *et al.*, 2012), fewer studies have analyzed the relation between childcare time and parents' wellbeing. For instance, Connelly and Kimmel (2015) report evidence of both American mothers and fathers enjoying their time spent on child caregiving; however, fathers enjoy parenting time more than mothers reporting higher stress and tiredness. Similarly, Musick and colleagues (2016), using microdata from the American Time Use Survey, found that parents consistently report greater subjective wellbeing in activities with children than without. Mothers, however, report less happiness, more stress, and greater fatigue in time with children than fathers do. These gender differences in the subjective perception of parents' time with children are likely to be explained by the existence of similar differences in nature, in addition to the quantity, of parenting time. For instance, prior research suggests that multitasking is a relevant source of gender inequality: mothers multitask more housework and childcare than fathers, contributing to enlarge the gender gap in time-use patterns. For mothers, multitasking is more likely to be associated with negative emotional experiences and work-family conflict (Offer and Schneider, 2011). Mothers and fathers also differ with regard to the proportion of childcare done in company of other adults: mothers are usually alone when performing childcare while

a large proportion of fathers' care time is shared with other adults and, especially, with mothers (Fuligni and Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Craig and Mullan, 2011). As a consequence, in most cases fathers' care time does not substitute for mothers' time (Craig, 2006). Furthermore, experiencing the childcare activities alone may be a source of stress: many studies enlighten the positive role of sharing tasks and responsibilities with the partner and/or other adults as a source of social capital (Logan and Spitze, 1996; Philipov *et al.*, 2006).

To date, most studies on parents' wellbeing in childcare time have focused on the US (e.g. Meier *et al.*, 2018), while European research is still rare. This study contributes to the existing literature by analyzing gender differences in Italian parents' enjoyment of childcare time and by measuring if and to what extent being in sole charge of children and performing housework as a parallel activity affects mothers' and fathers' subjective perception of parenting time. To this end, we rely on micro-data from the latest Time Use Survey (TUS) available for Italy (year 2013/4) and focus on a sub-sample of 5,148 parents of children aged up to 14 years who performed 31,309 childcare episodes. We use the information on the presence of a parallel activity and the information "with whom" to identify, respectively, multitasking and solo childcare episodes. Finally, we rely on episodes' enjoyment-scores to study mothers' and fathers' subjective wellbeing in child caregiving. We expect levels of parents' wellbeing associated with childcare to decline when the activity is performed together with housework and when the individual is alone while caring for the children. Moreover, we expect these effects to differ between men and women, that is gender interacts with the above conditions.

2. Data and methods

The study builds on micro-data from the Italian TUS for the year 2013/4 to evaluate fathers' and mothers' subjective perception of childcare time. TUS includes an individual file and a daily diary. The individual file provides information about the socio-demographic characteristics of the individual, the characteristics of the household, background information and information on the wellbeing of the respondents in different life domains. The daily diary consists of time data collected through the diary technique, i.e. respondents are asked to fill in the daily diary every 10-minutes reporting the following information: description of the main activity carried out, the possible presence of a parallel secondary activity, the location where the activity was performed, the level of enjoyment experienced and, if applicable, the presence of another person.

Our target population consists of 5,148 individuals aged between 25 and 54 years that are parents of children aged up to 14 years. In the individual questionnaire

parents are asked to assess their level of satisfaction with the quantity of time spent with their children. In a first step, we analyse the descriptive statistics based on this general question. Then, we use information from the enjoyment-scores associated by parents to childcare episodes to develop a more in-depth analysis of the wellbeing of mothers and fathers in child caregiving. The scores range from -3 to 3 and answer to the following question: *How pleasant was the moment?*¹ We follow a common approach adopted by literature in the field and develop a dichotomous Unpleasantness index or U-index (see Kahneman and Krueger, 2006). Similarly to Musick and colleagues (2016), we code an episode as unpleasant for the respondent (U-index=1) if its enjoyment-score is equal or below to the lowest 25th percentile of the scores recorded for the corresponding activity (differently, the U-index is assigned a value of 0). We use the U-index as dependent variable in a logistic model. More specifically, our dependent variable is the probability of parents to experience an unpleasant childcare episode (U-index=1). Our explicative variables are multitasking (i.e. childcare is the main activity and housework is the secondary activity) and the presence of another adult (i.e. whether the person was alone with the child/children while performing the activity or not), for which we add gender interactive effects. The control variables include: individual characteristics (age, education, employment status, life satisfaction, the number of daily hours spent on childcare), household characteristics (single parent/two parents household, number of children, age of the youngest child), characteristics of the episode (the episode starting hour, the duration of the episode) as well as characteristics of the diary (day of the week, survey's quarter).

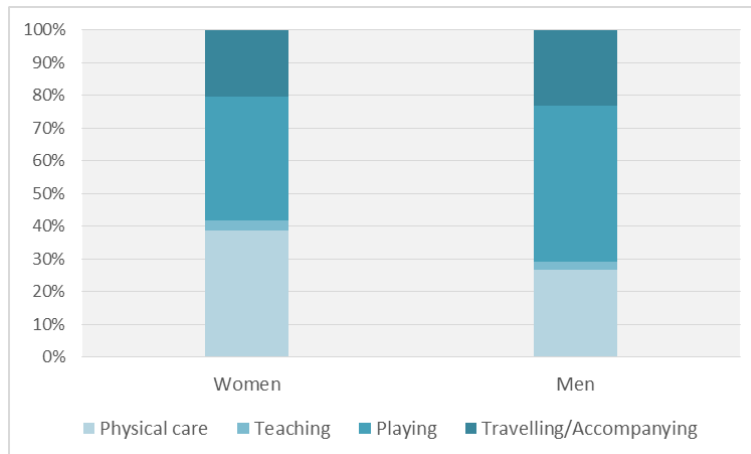
3. Results

On average, mothers spend 21h and fathers 12h per week caring for their children. We observe considerable gender differences not only in the levels but also in the composition of childcare time, with mothers spending more time on routine tasks than fathers. Indeed, physical care represents about 39% of the total childcare time for women compared to 27% for men (Figure 1). The great majority of parents' childcare episodes are single-tasking with no remarkable differences between genders (about 70% of childcare time for both mothers and fathers). However, looking at the composition of the multitasking episodes in Figure 2 the picture changes: while leisure is the most frequent activity among both multitasking parents, in line with previous studies (Offer and Schneider 2011), we find that childcare is

¹ The sample distribution of childcare episodes enjoyment scores is shown in Table A1 in the Appendix.

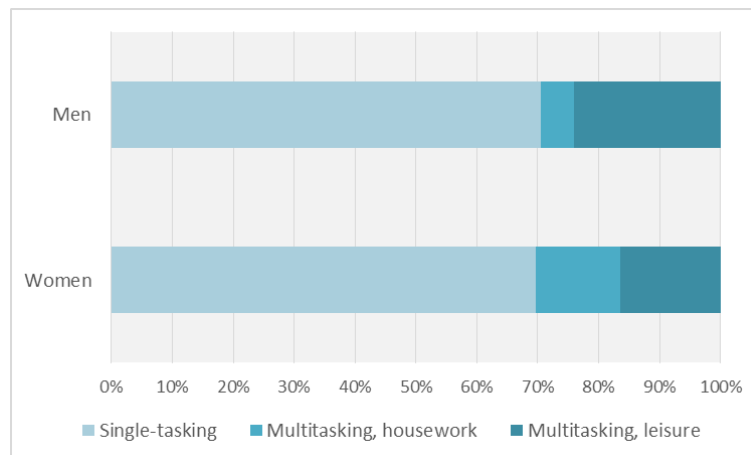
performed simultaneously with housework more often by mothers than by fathers (about 14% and 5% of total childcare episodes, respectively).

Figure 1 – Percentage composition of childcare time by detailed activities



Source: Authors' calculations based on micro-data from the Italian Time Use Survey (2013/4)

Figure 2 – Share of multitasking episodes by type of parallel activity

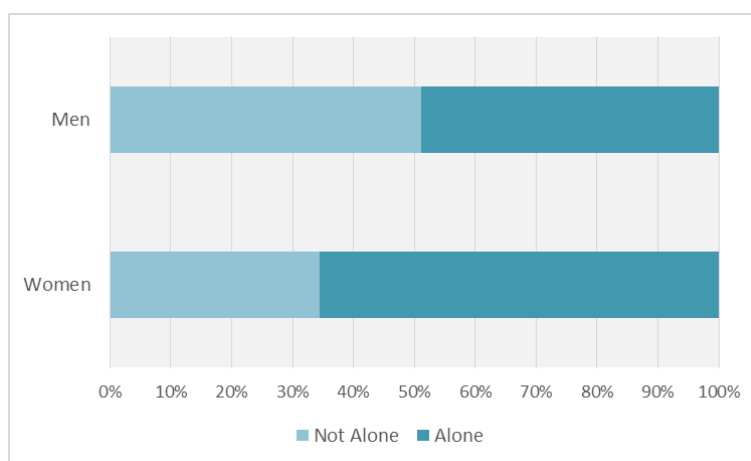


Source: Authors' calculations based on micro-data from the Italian Time Use Survey (2013/4)

Differences in the nature of parenting time of mothers and fathers are evident also with regard to the quantity of time spent doing childcare alone (i.e. the number of episodes in which the parent is the only adult present and, therefore, is fully responsible for the child). Our sample estimates show that during the majority of

childcare episodes (51%) fathers were not alone with their children, while the opposite is true for women for which only 34% of the childcare episodes were spent in company of other adults (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Share of childcare episodes by presence of at least another adult



Source: Authors' calculations based on micro-data from the Italian Time Use Survey (2013/4)

About 67% of mothers declared to be satisfied with their parenting time compared to 44.4% of fathers (Table 1). The majority of men (54%) declared to spend too little time with their children, the figure lowers to 31% for women while only a very small proportion of parents (the difference to 100%) said that the time is too much (2.2% of mothers and 1.5% of fathers). Childcare time shows a declining trend with age for women while the opposite is not true for men; nevertheless, the share of satisfaction is higher at youngest ages for both mothers (74.2%) and fathers (51.1%).

Table 1 – Parents' satisfaction with the amount of time devoted to children (weighted sample estimates)

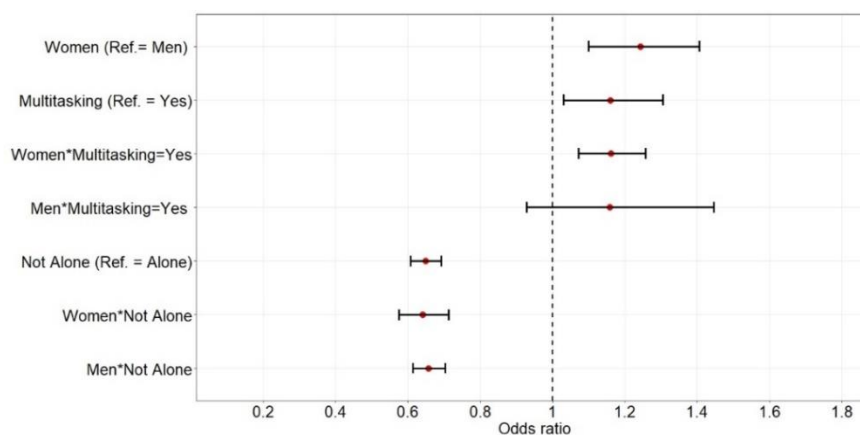
	MEN						WOMEN					
	Childcare weekly hours			Share of (dis)satisfaction			Childcare weekly hours			Share of (dis)satisfaction		
	Mean	SE	%	Yes, satisfied	SE	No, too little time	Mean	SE	%	Yes, satisfied	SE	No, too little time
Overall	12	1.9	44.4	0.9	54.1	0.9	21	2.2	67.1	0.8	30.7	0.8
Age group												
25-34	12	4.8	51.1	2.5	48.0	2.5	24	4.6	74.2	1.5	24.6	1.5
35-44	13	2.7	43.2	1.3	55.4	1.3	21	3.0	65.2	1.1	32.7	1.1
45-54	11	3.4	43.5	1.5	54.7	1.5	15	3.7	63.3	1.7	33.1	1.6
Household type												
Couple	12	1.9	44.4	0.9	54.0	0.9	20	2.3	68.4	0.8	29.5	0.8
Single-parent	17	13.2	41.9	7.3	58.1	7.3	23	6.1	58.9	2.3	38.7	2.2
Education												
High	13	5.1	34.2	2.1	64.6	2.1	22	4.8	62.8	1.8	36.1	1.7
Medium	13	3.1	42.6	1.4	56.2	1.4	21	3.1	62.0	1.2	34.7	1.2
Low	11	2.7	50.2	1.4	47.9	1.4	20	4.0	76.7	1.3	21.8	1.2
Employment												
Employed	12	2.0	41.5	0.9	57.3	0.9	19	2.6	52.4	1.1	46.1	1.1
Unemployed	14	6.3	71.6	2.6	24.8	2.5	23	3.6	85.3	0.9	11.6	0.8
N. of dep. childr.												
One	12	2.5	46.2	1.2	52.3	1.2	20	2.9	68.0	1.0	29.4	1.0
Two and more	13	3.0	42.0	1.4	56.6	1.4	22	3.3	65.8	1.2	32.6	1.2
Age of the youngest child												
Less than 6 years	13	3.7	44.4	1.3	54.6	1.3	25	4.6	68.0	1.2	30.9	1.1
From 6 to 14 years	10	3.3	44.5	1.3	53.6	1.3	15	3.8	66.3	1.1	30.5	1.1
Week day												
Mon-Fry	11	2.7	42.7	1.5	55.9	1.5	21	3.5	67.0	1.3	30.8	1.3
Sat-Sun	16	3.0	48.5	1.1	49.7	1.1	19	2.9	67.4	1.0	30.4	1.0
Geographic area												
North	13	2.9	43.7	1.3	55.4	1.3	22	3.5	64.6	1.2	34.1	1.2
Centre	13	4.5	37.2	2.2	61.0	2.2	21	5.1	65.8	1.9	33.1	1.9
South	11	3.1	49.2	1.5	48.6	1.5	20	3.3	71.1	1.2	24.9	1.2

Source: Authors' calculations based on micro-data from the Italian Time Use Survey (2013/4)

Despite spending more time on average with their children, single parents report lower satisfaction with the amount of parenting time compared to those living in a couple: the relation is particularly evident for mothers for which the share of satisfaction drops from 68.4% to 58.4%. Similarly, the share of dissatisfaction is higher for parents with higher education although they spend, on average, longer hours with their children than those with lower education. Being employed considerably reduces the satisfaction with parenting time for both men and women; on the other side, living in the South, where unemployment is more widespread, increases the share of satisfaction among parents. Childcare time only slightly increases for parents of two (or more) children compared to those with one child, which explains the higher share of dissatisfaction among the former. On the other side, the higher amount of time devoted to childcare by parents (and especially mothers) of pre-school children compared to those of children in school ages is accompanied by higher shares of satisfaction.

The survey's question on individuals' satisfaction with parenting time offers a partial picture of gender differences in subjective wellbeing in childcare giving based on parents' evaluation of the quantity rather than the quality of time with children. Moreover, previous studies have highlighted as momentary assessments of wellbeing tend to be more reliable than global assessments being less sensitive to the tendency of people to adjust their responses (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006; Musick *et al.*, 2015). Thus, episodes' enjoyment-scores can be very useful to obtain a broader understanding of men and women's subjective perception of child caregiving.

Figure 4 – Model estimates of the probability of experiencing an unpleasant childcare episode



Source: Authors' calculations based on micro-data from the Italian Time Use Survey (2013/4)

Our results for the probability of mothers and fathers to experiment an unpleasant episode highlight the existence of statistically significant gender differences in subjective wellbeing during overall childcare time with mothers showing higher values of the U-index than fathers (Figure 4)².

Looking at the simple effects of multitasking, we find that performing childcare together with domestic chores reduces the wellbeing of parents. However, results from the interaction between gender and multitasking reveal an increase in the probability of experiencing an unpleasant episode in the presence of parallel unpaid work for mothers but not that of fathers. By contrast, the presence of another adult significantly reduces the probability of parents to perceive the time spent on childcare as unpleasant. The interaction with gender reveals that the effect holds for both mothers and fathers.

4. Concluding remarks

In this article we used micro-data from the latest Italian time use survey available for 2013/4 to study differences between men' and women' subjective perception of parenting time, paying specific attention to the role of multitasking and the co-presence of other adults in affecting self-reported wellbeing during childcare activities. Based on episodes-enjoyment scores, we built a dichotomous indicator of unpleasantness. Our findings indicate mothers to spend on average 21h in child caregiving per week, 9h more than fathers. In line with previous literature, our results indicate that compared to fathering, mothering involves not only more overall time commitment but also more multitasking and more time alone with children (Craig, 2006).

Similarly to Milkie and colleagues (2004), we find that most fathers want to spend more time with their children. On the other side, the majority of mothers are satisfied with their amount of parenting time. Consistently with previous studies, we observe parents enjoying childcare but with important gender differences: looking at the overall childcare time, mothers are more likely to experience less pleasant moments. Contrary to our expectations, the model estimates show multitasking to reduce the enjoyment of childcare time only for mothers. Being alone while performing childcare considerably reduces the subjective wellbeing of both parents. In this perspective, men benefit from a greater advantage compared to women: only in 34% of the childcare episodes mothers were not alone with their children, while the share increases to 51% for fathers. According to Sullivan (1997), the larger the share of time in which unpaid work is undertaken in the presence of other adults, the

². Full model estimates are reported in the Appendix (Table A2 and A3).

more participation in it can be regarded as auxiliary. Put in different words, fathers are likely to play a less demanding role of “helper” while mothers bear the greater responsibility for children and to feel more stressed or under pressure deriving less enjoyment from childcare time (Craig, 2006).

Time use literature has highlighted the existence of large gender differences in the division of childcare tasks (e.g. Craig and Powell, 2011) and our estimates confirmed those findings, showing mothers to do more routine work than fathers. Some childcare activities, especially those involving high levels of interaction with children, are likely to be perceived as more pleasant and/or to be more highly valued by parents than others. Future steps of this research will, therefore, go in the direction of measuring gender differences in the subjective perception of parenting time in relation to detailed activities.

Appendix

Table A1 – Sample distribution of childcare episodes enjoyment scores

Score	Men			Women		
	N	%	Cumulative %	N	%	Cumulative %
-3	25	0.3	0.3	174	0.8	0.8
-2	55	0.6	0.9	160	0.7	1.5
-1	139	1.5	2.4	484	2.2	3.7
0	1,120	12.5	14.9	3,655	16.4	20.0
1	1,501	16.7	31.6	4,214	18.9	38.9
2	2,315	25.8	57.4	5,823	26.1	65.0
3	3,819	42.6	100.0	7,825	35.0	100.0
Total	8,974	100.0		22,335	100.0	

Table A2 – Parameter estimates

Variable	Parameter estimate	Standard Error	Prob> Chi Square
Intercept	-0.2766	0.0404	<.0001
Gender (Ref=Men)	0.1089	0.0314	0.0005
Multitasking (Ref=Not)	0.0742	0.0301	0.0138
Episode duration (Ref=more than 60 min.)			
less than 20 min	0.1209	0.0214	<.0001
20'-39' min	0.1334	0.0234	<.0001
40'-59' min	-0.1428	0.0346	<.0001
Presence of an adult (Ref=not)	-0.2166	0.0164	<.0001
Daily childcare time (Ref=more than 240 min.)			
up to 90 min.	0.0593	0.0247	0.0164
91'-150' min.	-0.0475	0.0232	0.0402
151'-240' min.	-0.1066	0.0218	<.0001

Table A2 (continued) – Parameter estimates

Age group (Ref=45-54 years)			
25-34	-0.0701	0.0240	0.0035
35-44	-0.0568	0.0181	0.0017
Household type (Ref=single parent)	-0.0033	0.0211	0.8765
Number of children (Ref=two or more)	-0.1907	0.0134	<.0001
Age of the youngest child (Ref=11-14 years)			
0-2 years	-0.1876	0.0250	<.0001
3-5 years	-0.2238	0.0237	<.0001
6-10 years	0.0954	0.0229	<.0001
Educational level (Ref=low)			
High	0.0990	0.0209	<.0001
Medium	-0.0757	0.0172	<.0001
Employment status (Ref=unemployed)	-0.0530	0.0151	0.0005
Life satisfaction (Ref=Satisfied)			
Dissatisfied	0.1576	0.0201	<.0001
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	-0.0028	0.0198	0.8898
Survey's month (Ref=August-October)			
November-January	-0.0172	0.0213	0.4187
February-April	-0.0638	0.0216	0.0032
May-July	-0.0354	0.0228	0.1212
Week day (Ref=Monday-Friday)	0.0037	0.0151	0.8075
Episode hour of start (Ref= h16-24)			
h 00-8	0.3885	0.0239	<.0001
h 9-16	-0.0924	0.0186	<.0001
Gender*Multitasking (Ref =Men, Not)	0.0007	0.0300	0.9801
Gender*Alone (Ref =Men, Not)	0.0062	0.0161	0.6993

Table A3 – Model effects' estimates

Effect	Estimate	Standard error	Prob> Chi Square
Women vs Men	1.243	0.078	<.0001
Multitasking Yes vs Not	1.160	0.070	0.014
Multitasking Yes vs Not in gender=Women	1.162	0.047	<.0001
Multitasking Yes vs Not in gender=Men	1.158	0.131	0.195
Women vs men in multitasking =Yes	1.245	0.146	0.061
Women vs men in multitasking =Not	1.241	0.046	<.0001
Not alone vs alone	0.648	0.021	<.0001
Not alone vs alone in Gender= Men	0.640	0.035	<.0001
Not alone vs alone in Gender = Women	0.657	0.023	<.0001
Women vs Men – Alone	1.228	0.081	0.002
Women vs Men - Not alone	1.259	0.095	0.002

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SUMMARY

Gender differences in the subjective perception of parenting time

We use data from the latest edition of the Italian Time Use Survey (2013-2014) and select a subsample of mothers and fathers of children aged up to 14 years to measure gender differences in parents' subjective perception of childcare time. Based on childcare episodes' enjoyment scores, we build a dichotomous indicator of unpleasantness and use it as dependent variable in a logistic model. Our explicative variables are gender, multitasking (i.e. presence of housework as parallel activity) and the presence of another adult. Our results indicate the existence of considerable gender differences in the quantity and nature of parenting time: not only mothers devote more time to childcare, but they are also more likely to multitask and to spend time alone with children than fathers. These differences are reflected in the subjective experience of parenting time. Our descriptive results indicate that the majority of fathers want to spend more time with their children. Additionally, model estimates show that fathers are more likely to report higher levels of wellbeing in childcare time than mothers. Multitasking housework and childcare negatively affect the subjective perception of parenting time for mothers but not for fathers, while being alone considerably reduces levels of childcare enjoyment for both parents. Future developments of this research will focus on estimating gender differences in the subjective perception of parenting time in relation to detailed childcare activities.

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