Trends in Patterns of Employment since the German Reunification and the Wellbeing of Parents in Eastern and Western Germany

Dr. Angelika Tölke (German Youth Institute, Munich) / Dr. Heike Wirth (GESIS, Mannheim)

Historically family policies in East and West Germany were characterized by two rather opposite guiding principles. While in East Germany (former GDR) full-time employment of women with children under the age of 3 was commonplace and in many ways strongly supported by the government, in West Germany labor force participation of women with family responsibilities was less esteemed. In wide sections of the population it was a common opinion that pre-school children were likely to suffer if their mother worked. After German reunification in 1989 the family policies of both parts of Germany were harmonized, meaning that the policies prevalent in western Germany were transferred to eastern Germany. However the well developed facilities of publicly financed childcare were largely maintained in eastern Germany whereas in western Germany the availability of childcare facilities was only gradually improved over time. Hence, our paper focuses on whether and how the employment behavior of parents in both parts of Germany has changed since reunification. Have patterns of employment in ‘east’ and ‘west’ Germany converged over the last two decades or have differences persisted? The focus of our analyses is on the development of the three main patterns of employment as listed below. (1) The traditional employment pattern which is characterized by a male bread-winner and a female homemaker, (2) the semi-traditional employment pattern with the man working full-time and the woman working part-time, and (3) the egalitarian employment pattern where both partners work about the same amount. Moreover, a second aim of this paper is to examine the impact of employment patterns on mothers and fathers well being in regards to their family life in both parts of Germany.

The analyses of the wellbeing in one’s family cover three dimensions with the following aspects: (1) Personal strain: worries; stress; overwhelmed with parental role. (2) Leisure time: family, partner or individually centered activities. (3) Fulfillment of family life: family climate; happiness in partnership; joy of mother-/ fatherhood.

Data and Methods

Data from the German Microcensus 1991 to 2009 are used to describe the changes in employment behavior of parents in eastern and western Germany. The German Microcensus is a 1% sample of the total population living in Germany and is conducted by the Federal Bureau of Statistics. The data provide information on the economic and social situation of the population as well as on employment, the labor market and the educational system. The analyses of thewell being of mothers and fathers employ data of the cross-sectional survey Growing up in Germany (AID:A) conducted in 2009. The focus of AID:A is on children’s, teenager’s and adult’s life circumstances, their stresses and strains, their family structure as well as their socio-economic situation. Thus the AID:A data enable us to examine the everyday family life. In total AID:A includes 25,000 individuals aged 0 to 55 years. In our analysis we study mothers and fathers aged 18 to 55 living with at least one child under the age of 18 years.

In the first part of our analysis we describe changes in employment patterns at intervals of five years starting in 1991. Eastern and western Germany is compared and the descriptive results are differentiated by the age of the youngest child in the household. In order to study the wellbeing of fathers and mothers several items were selected from AID:A and three main dimensions were defined via exploratory factor analysis: personal strain, leisure time, and fulfillment of family life. The total of the individual scores for each of the three dimensions were used in linear regression analyses as dependent variables. The independent variables are: employment pattern, marital
status, region of residence, age of the respondent, number of children, age of the youngest child, and the constellation of mothers and fathers level of education.

Main Findings

How have the employment patterns of parents changed over time? In both parts of Germany there is an increase in semi-traditional working arrangements (man working full-time, woman working part-time) and a decrease in egalitarian employment patterns with both partners working equal amounts. Nevertheless, even 20 years after reunification there are remarkable differences in the labor force participation of couples with children in eastern and western Germany. Parents living in the eastern part of Germany are more likely to have egalitarian working arrangements than parents in western Germany. Moreover in eastern Germany the age of the youngest child is less important in determining parent’s pattern of employment than in the West. In western Germany the parental division of labor market participation is still strongly influenced by the age of children. For couples living with children under the age of 3, the traditional employment pattern (male breadwinner/housewife) is predominant. In families with school age children, there is a trend towards semi-traditional employment patterns, with the man working full-time and the woman working part-time. Moreover, even though the facilities for childcare for pre-school children have improved in western Germany, the percentage of couples practicing an egalitarian employment pattern has decreased. Thus it seems that couples in western Germany are still bound to the traditional gender-based division of labor whereas parents in eastern Germany adhere more to egalitarian patterns. In eastern Germany most mothers currently working part-time would like to work more and many of those who are not employed would like to work. Their current working arrangements are often not chosen voluntarily but are a result of the difficult labor market in eastern Germany. Employment patterns work as time-frames for the everyday life of families and affect the division of housework, the responsibility for childcare and other family activities to a large extent Therefore we expected that the wellbeing and personal strain of mothers and fathers would differ with respect to the currently practiced employment patterns. However, our results give evidence that there is neither a systematic correlation between employment patterns and wellbeing nor between employment patterns and personal strain. Beyond this, one compelling finding is that although one would expect more “double burden” in eastern German families as these parents more often practice egalitarian working patterns the opposite is the case. Parents in eastern Germany spend more leisure time with their family and are happier with their family life than their counterparts in western Germany. In comparison East-German fathers are on average the happiest group studied followed by East-German mothers. On average West Germans are less happy with their family life. To explain these differences further analyses will be continued which will focus on the role of fathers. The quality of relationship and parenthood might depend on their egalitarian involvement in household tasks and childcare responsibilities. But even cultural norms and habits experienced during the time of the former GDR such as perceiving ones family as a "retreat” might also play a role here.

Besides these east-west differences the family development (i.e. the number of children and the age of the youngest child) is important for determining wellbeing. With increasing age of the youngest child worries and stress increases in the east and west as well as for mothers and fathers, whereas the number of children is a major concern only for mothers. Family enlargement with a second child reduces the wellbeing of mothers significantly compared to the one-child family stage.

Contact:

toelke@dji.de
heike.wirth@gesis.org