"*We Don't Let It Build Up*": Relationship Satisfaction and Well-being among Equal-Sharing, Role-Reversed and Semi-Traditional Parents

Mariana Pinho[1], Ruth Gaunt [2], Ana Jordan[3], Anna Tarrant[3], Nicola Chanamuto[4] and Agata Wezyk[5]

[1] Centre for Environmental & Marine Studies, Department of Biology, University of Aveiro, Portugal

[2] School of Psychology, University of Lincoln, UK University, UK

[3] School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Lincoln, UK

[4] Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching, University of Lincoln, UK

[5] Department of Psychology, Bournemouth University, UK

Author Notes

The authors report there are no conflicts of interests to declare. This research project was funded by the Nuffield Foundation (grant WEL/43623), but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. For more information visit www.nuffieldfoundation.org. The authors also extend their thanks for the financial support to CESAM by FCT/MCTES (UIDP/50017/2020+UIDB/50017/2020+LA/P/0094/2020), through national funds.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mariana Pinho, CESAM, Department of Biology, University of Aveiro, Campus Universitário De Santiago, 3810-193 Aveiro, Portugal. Email: mlobopinho@ua.pt

Abstract

This mixed-methods study examined couples' relationship quality, satisfaction and well-being by comparing semi-traditional, equal-sharing and role-reversed couples. Quantitative analysis involved 2,813 parents (1,380 men, 1,433 women) with at least one child aged 11 or under who were primary caregivers, primary breadwinners, or equal-sharers. Qualitative analysis drew on 60 in-depth interviews with 10 couples from each of the groups. Semi-traditional couples reported lower relationship quality and positive affect compared to other arrangements. Equal-sharers and role-reversed couples were more likely to discuss their frustrations and make conscious attempts to resolve them. Women in semi-traditional arrangements had lower levels of relationship quality and life satisfaction than women in equal-sharing and role-reversed arrangements. They were also more likely to report disagreements and frustrations. Caregiving parents also expressed lower levels of self-esteem compared to parents in breadwinning and equal-sharing roles. Our findings highlight how different breadwinning and caring responsibilities can impact parents' well-being and relationship.

Keywords: gender; childcare; equal-sharers; caregiving fathers; breadwinning mothers; role-reserved couples.

"*We Don't Let It Build Up*": Relationship Satisfaction and Well-being among Equal-Sharing, Role-Reversed and Semi-Traditional Parents

Parenthood is a complex experience that can be both stressful and rewarding. Even though having children can provide a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Musick et al., 2016; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020), parenthood is also associated with psychological challenges and relationship stressors (e.g. Lawrence et al., 2008; Sanders et al., 2022). For example, parents express higher levels of fatigue and lower subjective well-being (Hansen, 2012; Sanders et al., 2022). Parenthood also appears to have an impact on couples' relationships, with relationship satisfaction declining after the birth of a child and amplifying existing marital difficulties (Huss & Pollmann-Schult, 2020; Lawrence et al., 2008; Schulz et al., 2006).

Ample research has identified conflicts regarding the division of housework and childcare as a major source of relationship dissatisfaction among parents (Carlson et al., 2020; Chai & Schieman, 2023). This study seeks to expand our understanding of these relationship dynamics by comparing three distinct parenting arrangements: semi-traditional couples, where the mother is the primary caregiver and the father is the primary breadwinner; equal-sharers where mother and father are both equally responsible for caregiving and breadwinning; and role-reversed couples, where the father is the primary caregiver, and the mother is the primary breadwinner. Given the relative recency and rarity of equal-sharing and role-reversed parenting, the body of research on this phenomenon is relatively small (e.g. Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020; Pinho et al., 2021) and little is known about the implications of sharing equally or reversing roles on parents' well-being and relationships. To this end, a mixed-methods approach was used to uniquely compare mothers and fathers in three distinct arrangements.

Relationship Quality and Satisfaction

Research demonstrates that parenting practices are related to parents’ relationship satisfaction (Linville, et al., 2010; Rauch-Anderegg et al., 2020). The share of childcare and its perceived fairness can influence overall satisfaction within couples. An unequal division of housework has been associated with low relationship quality and satisfaction (Carlson et al., 2020; Chai & Schieman, 2023; Gillespie et al., 2019; Ruppanner et al., 2018). In general, highly involved fathers appear to have more stable relationships and higher relationship satisfaction (Hosley et al., 2008; Petts & Knoester, 2019; Schieman et al., 2018). Perceptions and expectations of housework and childcare distribution are predictors of couples' relationship quality and satisfaction (Adamsons, 2013; Forste & Fox, 2012; Mencarini & Sironi, 2012).

Findings suggest that men's housework hours mean more to women's perceptions of fairness than women’s own hours (DeMaris & Longmore, 1996; Ruppanner, 2008). As such, a greater gendered division of housework is associated with women’s diminished sense of fairness and linked with lower marital quality overall (Lavee & Katz, 2002; Ruppanner et al., 2018).

While some research shows that primary caregiving fathers and equal-sharing mothers report average or above average relationship satisfaction (Kanji & Schober, 2014; Rochlen et al., 2008; Zimmerman, 2000), others found that couples where women have a main responsibility for breadwinning express lower satisfaction with their relationship when compared with equal-earner and male-breadwinner arrangements (Bertrand et al., 2015; Blom & Hewitt, 2020; Syrda, 2019).

Parental Subjective Well-being

Parenting practices and employment are shown to be related to individuals’ well-being (Linville et al., 2010; Pavot & Diener, 2008; Ruppanner et al., 2019). Studies suggest that employment is associated with higher well-being (Pavot & Diener, 2008) whereas

unemployment is linked to lower self-esteem (Sheeran et al., 1995; Winefield et al., 1992) and happiness (Frey & Sturzer, 2000).

Previous research shows that there is a large variability among primary caregiving fathers regarding their well-being. Some caregiving fathers report average or above average levels of well-being and life satisfaction (Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Rochlen et al., 2008; Rochlen & McKelley, 2009) and their psychological well-being does not differ from mothers in the same role (Jones, Foley & Golombok, 2022). Furthermore, the role of primary caregiver appears to alleviate fathers' negative feelings of anxiety, ambivalence, isolation, and depressive symptoms (Gill et al., 2021). However, other primary caregiving fathers report feeling stigmatised and socially isolated (Caperton et al., 2020; Rochlen et al., 2010), experiencing higher levels of depressive symptoms, loneliness, sadness, stress, and less happiness while interacting in a variety of contexts with adults, when compared to caregiving mothers (Holmes et al., 2021; Kramer & Pak, 2018; Rochlen & McKelley, 2009). Research also suggests that primary caregiving mothers express psychological stress and low levels of emotional well-being (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012; Wikle & Yorgason, 2022).

The responsibility of financially providing for one's family is linked to stress and lower well-being for both men and women (Chesley, 2017; Kaufman, 2013). Breadwinning fathers with stay-at-home partners expressed poorer mental health compared with semi-traditional arrangements (King et al., 2020). Both breadwinning fathers and mothers exhibit lower well-being and life satisfaction when compared to men and women in dual-earner couples (Kowalewska & Vitali, 2023; Wikle & Yorgason, 2022). However, primary breadwinning mothers display higher levels of stress and lower well-being than fathers in the same role (Zimmerman, 2000). Finally, research shows that dual earner couples express high levels of well-being, and state that working provides them with a sense of fulfilment, more confidence and increased self-esteem (Meeussen et al., 2019; Wikle & Yorgason, 2022).

Overview and Research Questions

This study aimed to examine how parents' relationship satisfaction, quality and well-being vary across different parenting arrangements. The existing literature has demonstrated mixed results. While some research showed primary caregiving fathers and equal-sharing mothers report average or above average relationship satisfaction, others found that couples where women have a main responsibility for breadwinning express lower satisfaction with their relationship when compared with equal-earner and male-breadwinner arrangements. However very few studies have explored breadwinning mothers' or equal-sharing couples' relationship quality and satisfaction, especially as part of a comprehensive comparative research design. The literature reviewed above also suggests that well-being varies among primary caregiving fathers, with some reporting average or above average levels of well-being and life satisfaction and others experiencing high levels of depression symptoms, loneliness, sadness and stress. Primary breadwinning fathers and mothers exhibit lower well-being and life satisfaction when compared to couples in where breadwinning is shared more equally. The present study was designed to address the following set of questions:

- How do couples' relationship satisfaction and quality differ across equal-sharers, role-reversed and semi-traditional arrangements? What reasons underlie different levels of relationship satisfaction?
- Do couples' arrangements affect parents' subjective well-being? What reasons explain different levels of well-being?

These questions were explored in a sample of parents with young children residing in the United Kingdom (UK). The UK is characterised by a male-breadwinner/part-time female-caregiver model overall, as reflected by having one of the highest rates of part-time employment for women (Eurofund, 2021). High costs of childcare services in the UK partly explain these trends (Coleman et al., 2022), costing the average double-wage earner family

with two children 29% of their income (OECD, 2022). In the UK families' ability to freely choose their paid work and childcare arrangements are therefore constrained by complex internal and external factors (Pinho et al., 2024).

Method

Quantitative Data

Participants

Data were gathered from a sample of parents living in the UK as part of a larger project on work and childcare (Gaunt et al., 2022). A total of 6,072 met the inclusion criteria: they were married or cohabiting with their opposite-sex partner and had at least one child aged 11 years or younger. Within this sample, 2,813 (1,380 men and 1,433 women) reported a division of labour in which one of three distinct family roles could be identified and were therefore retained for further analysis excluding 3,259 participants who did not clearly fit into one of the roles, as no other categories were considered. Primary caregiving parents were defined as working at least 7 weekly hours less than their partner, providing at least 7 weekly hours of childcare more than their partner, performing more childcare tasks and contributing up to 40% of the family income. Primary breadwinning parents were defined as working at least 7 weekly hours more than their partner, providing at least 7 less weekly hours of childcare, carrying out up to half of the childcare tasks and contributing at least 60% of the family income. Equal-sharing parents were defined as having up to 5 hours difference per week between partners in their work and childcare hours, carrying out approximately half of the childcare tasks and contributing approximately 50% of the family income (up to a 40/60 ratio). Based on these criteria, 1,342 participants were categorized as caregivers, 1,124 as breadwinners and 347 as equal-sharers.

Most participants were married or in a civil partnership and lived in England. The quantitative sample had a slight overrepresentation of participants who identified as white

(90% compared to 86% of the general population) or White British (84.1% compared to 80.5% of the population) and had a university degree (61% compared to 47% of the population) (Department for Education, 2021; Office for National Statistics, 2020). There were no significant differences between the three study groups in educational qualifications, ethnicity or region where they lived.

Participants' work hours range from 0 to 96 per week (M = 30.24, SD = 17.63), with breadwinners working from 8 to 96 hours per week (M = 42.61, SD = 8.88), equal sharers from 0 to 65 weekly hours (M = 33.88, SD = 13.86) and caregivers working from 0 to 60 hours per week (M = 12.94, SD = 12.31). In terms of their income, both fathers and mothers who were the main breadwinners earned on average a personal monthly income between £2,601 to £3,160. Equal sharing fathers and mothers earned on average between £2,001 to £2,600 – lower than main breadwinners' incomes but as a family their income was higher (F (2,2502) = 18.66, p < .001).

Parents in semi-traditional arrangements tended to have more children (M = 1.99, SD = 0.87) compared to parents in equal sharing (M = 1.80, SD = 0.78) and role-reversed arrangements (M = 1.78, SD = 0.89), F(2, 2807) = 11.92, p < .001. The age of the youngest child ranged from one month to 11 years (M = 4.49, SD = 3.33), however the youngest child of equally sharing couples tended to be older (M = 5.06, SD = 3.32) compared to semi-traditional (M = 4.24, SD = 3.30) and role-reversed couples (M = 3.70, SD = 2.77), F(2, 2807) = 13.23, p < .001.

Measures

Time Investment. Participants were asked to indicate the number of hours they worked for pay per week, and their partner's weekly working hours. They were also asked to indicate the number of weekly hours they spend alone with their child when the child is awake, and the number of hours their partner spends alone with the child.

Relationship Quality and Satisfaction. To measure relationship quality and satisfaction the short version of *Enriching Relationship Issues, Communication, and Happiness* was used (ENRICH; Fowers & Olson, 1993). This scale measures participants' perceptions of relationship quality in different dimensions (child rearing, communication, conflict resolution, division of labour, financial management, leisure activities, relationship with the extended family, sexuality, spouse's personal traits and trust). The scale is composed of 10 items and participants indicated their agreement with each statement (e.g. "*I am not pleased with the personality characteristics and personal habits of my partner*") on a scale from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*. Responses were recoded so that higher scores reflected greater relationship quality. An average of the 10 items was calculated to create a measure of overall relationship quality. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .82. An additional item was included to assess the overall relationship satisfaction. Participants were asked, "*Overall, how satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner?*" and indicated their answers on a 7-point scale, ranging from *1 = Extremely Dissatisfied* to *7 = Extremely Satisfied*. Higher scores on both measures reflected higher relationship quality and satisfaction.

Subjective Well-being. Subjective well-being was assessed using the *Positive and Negative Affect Scale* (PANAS) (Watson et al., 1988). The scale contains two dimensions: Positive Affect (PA) reflects the extent that a person feels enthusiastic, active, and alert (e.g. "*Interested*"); and Negative Affect (NA) reflects subjective distress and displeasure (e.g. *"Distressed*"). The measure had 20 items and responses were recorded on a scale from 1 = *Very Slightly/Not at All* to 5 = *Extremely*. The items related to each dimension were averaged separately to create the participants' scores on two scales. On the PA sub-dimension higher scores represented higher levels of positive affect, while higher scores on the NA sub-

dimension represented higher levels of negative affect. Cronbach's alpha was .90 for each of these scales.

Life Satisfaction. Life satisfaction was measured with the *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS), a five-items measure developed by Diener et al. (1985) to assess satisfaction with the respondent's life as a whole. Subjective well-being is defined as cognitive and affective evaluations of one's life (Diener, 1984). This measure relates to the cognitive evaluative component of subjective well-being. Participants answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree* to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each statement (e.g. *"In most ways my life is close to my ideal*"). The average score for the five items was computed in order to measure participants' life satisfaction. Higher scores on this measure reflected higher levels of satisfaction. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .89.

Self-esteem. To measure participant's self-esteem from a global perspective, *Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale* (Rosenberg, 1965) was used. This measure consists of 10 items reflecting perceptual statements of self-satisfaction, self-worth, self-respect and personal pride (e.g. *"On the whole, I am satisfied with myself*"). Half of the statements were positive and half were negative and responses were indicated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 4 = *Strongly Agree.* Responses were recoded so that higher scores reflected higher levels of self-esteem. The average score for the ten items was computed in order to measure respondents' self-esteem. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .91.

Socio-demographic Variables. Participants indicated their age, occupation, level of education and ethnic background. Participants also reported the gender and age of their youngest child, the total number of children in the household, their individual monthly income on a nine-point scale ranging from 1 (*less than £590*) to 9 (*more than £4,300*) and the percentage of family income they contribute relative to their partner.

Procedure

For the quantitative part of the study, participants were recruited through an online questionnaire administered to members of the YouGov UK panel of 800,000+ individuals. YouGov is one of the UK leading survey companies. It has a panel of nationally representative members who are rewarded for sharing their data and taking part in research. Emails were sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample of the required profile. Participants who had more than one child were asked to answer the questions regarding their youngest child. The completion of the questionnaire took 20 minutes on average. Ethical approval was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the study.

Qualitative Data

Participants

A sample of 60 participants, comprising of 30 different-gender couples (10 semi-traditional; 10 equal-sharers and 10 role-reversed) were interviewed. Participants were aged between 32 and 56 years old, most identified as white British (83.3%) and had a university degree (93.3%). The age of the youngest child ranged from four months to 11 years and the number of children in the family ranged from 1 to 4. The participants' individual incomes varied greatly between less than £590 to over £4,300 per month. Fifty-eight per cent of parents worked full-time (30 or more hours per week), 32% worked part-time or held zero-hours contracts (29 or less hours per week), and 10% were retired or unemployed.

Procedure

Participants were recruited online through numerous parenting websites, web forums, blogs and social media. A shorter version of the questionnaire was used to identify and select couples with one of the three distinct family arrangements. Couples who met the inclusion

criteria were invited by email to take part. Participants completed a consent form online and confirmed their consent verbally at the beginning of the interview.

Both partners from each couple were interviewed separately and were asked about the division of parenting and breadwinning activities, their history as a couple, conflicts in their relationships (including around parenting and the division of work), and how they feel about themselves as parents and about their partner. Interviews lasted between 1 to 2 hours, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. All participants were debriefed and once both partners completed their interviews, they were given a £30 Amazon voucher to thank them for their participation.

Analytic Strategy

Parents' relationship quality, satisfaction and well-being were explored by examining the differences across parenting arrangements and within each gender. A set of two 2 (gender: men vs. women) X 3 (parenting arrangement: semi-traditional vs. equal-sharing vs. role-reversed) between-participants analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to explore gender and arrangement effects on relationship quality and satisfaction, and well-being. Significant main effects and interactions were followed up with simple-effects analysis.

Thematic analysis was conducted examining qualitative data regarding participants' relationship quality, satisfaction, conflicts over parenting and division of responsibilities, and subjective well-being. As a first step, the research team familiarised themselves with the data, reading through all the answers to become aware of all aspects, as well as writing a detailed 'pen portrait' for each participant (Neale, 2016). Codes were then generated to identify interesting characteristics of the data. Once all the answers were coded and organised, a list of the different codes identified was produced and relevant coded data extracts were sorted into themes. Subsequently, themes were refined and discussed among the research team to

form a coherent pattern. Using a convergent design, interviews and qualitative data analysis were conducted independently from the quantitative analysis. Qualitative analysis was conducted after the quantitative analysis had been concluded, and the results were combined and compared to draw conclusions and avoid bias.

Results

Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson correlations among relationship quality, relationship satisfaction, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, self-esteem and time investment in paid work and childcare are presented in Table 1. Correlation analyses were conducted on the full sample separately for men and women.

Relationship Quality and Satisfaction

A 2 (gender: men vs. women) X 3 (parenting arrangement: semi-traditional vs. equal-sharing vs. role-reversed) ANOVA on participants' relationship quality (see Figure 1) revealed no significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 2713) = 3.67$, $p = .055$, but a significant main effect of parenting arrangement $F(2, 2713) = 10.01$, $p < .001$. Post hoc Tukey tests indicated that parents in semi-traditional arrangements expressed lower relationship quality than equal-sharing arrangements ($p < .001$). This effect was qualified by a significant gender x parenting arrangement interaction, $F(2, 2713) = 11.02$, $p < .001$; indicating that mothers in semi-traditional arrangements ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .85$) expressed a significantly lower level of relationship quality compared to equal-sharing ($M = 4.05$, $SD = .71$, t (1307) = -5.30, $p < .001$) and primary breadwinning mothers ($M = 3.85$, $SD = .77$, $t = -2.65$, $p = .008$), while fathers reported similar levels of relationship quality across the three parenting arrangements.

A similar analysis was conducted on relationship satisfaction (see Figure 2). This analysis yielded no main effects of gender or parenting arrangement ($F(1, 2713) = 3.81$, $p = .051$; $F(2, 2713) = 2.86$, $p = .057$, respectively), but a significant gender x parenting arrangement interaction, $F(2, 2713) = 3.59$, $p = .028$. Post hoc Tukey tests indicated that

caregiving mothers (M = 5.52, SD = 1.38) expressed a significantly lower level of relationship satisfaction than equal sharing mothers (M = 5.93, SD = 1.33, t (1291) = -3.20, p = .002), whereas fathers in all arrangements did not differ significantly in their levels of relationship satisfaction.

"We Communicate There and Then": Decision Making and Conflict Resolution

In line with the quantitative findings, mothers in semi-traditional couples seemed more likely to report disagreements over parenting and the division of tasks while their partners did not seem to notice or acknowledge any issues. Reflecting this broader pattern, one primary caregiving mother reported having lots of conflicts with her partner:

> Oh quite a lot […] it's my frustration sometimes more than…like I just wish he would take them for a little bit or take them out of the way or…like last night, for example, oh I was trying to do work and finish my day off […] and I asked just please help. But he said he would but he still didn't [laughs] so… (Karen, Primary caregiving mother).

Her partner, on the other hand, presented a contrasting view, as he claimed they did not have conflicts anymore because they had 'organically assumed roles':

> In the early, early days it, it was a general who's doing more […] who's doing more work around the house […] who was seen to be loading the dishwasher more or making sure that the house is clean […] not so much now as perhaps we've organically assumed roles […] Nowadays…I think there are less arguments. There's not really arguments about who does this, who does that (Paul, Primary breadwinning father).

Couples were asked about conflicts related to disagreements on approaches towards parenting (e.g. disciplining or responding to the child's needs) and the division of housework or childcare. Therefore, couples in all arrangements mainly provided examples of those issues, particularly when one partner or both felt tasks were being unfairly divided.

In general, equal-sharers and role-reversed couples were more likely to say that they discussed their frustrations with each other and attempted to resolve them.

> I think we're also quite good communicators so if there's something that, like say I feel I'm doing too much or I feel that he's done more than me, we will both talk about that. [...] So I think because we have quite clear and open communication, I think it's fine cause even if we weren't happy with something we'd just change it. And we'd just talk about it. (Abby, Equal-sharing mother)

For role reversed couples, communication and adjustment of their behaviour also seemed to be key strategies to solve their conflicts.

> [...] I really pride…myself and [partner] on is that we communicate if, if there's any issues. We communicate there and then and we don't let it build. […] one of us will say to the other, you know, 'that's not how I would have done it'. 'I would have done x, y, z' and then move on (Nathalie, Primary breadwinning mother).

Equal-sharing and role-reversed couples tended to attribute their lack of conflict to knowing each other well, being good communicators, providing mutual support and adjusting over time.

Subjective Well-being

Analysis conducted on participants' positive affect (see Figure 3) revealed a significant main effect of parenting arrangement, $F(2, 2713) = 8.02$, $p < .001$, but no main effect of gender, $F(1, 2713) = 0.42$, $p = .837$, or gender x parenting arrangement interaction $F(2, 2713) = .90$, $p = .41$. Post hoc Tukey tests indicated that couples with semi-traditional arrangements ($M = 3.14$, $SD = .79$) expressed lower positive affect than equal-sharing ($M = 3.31$, $SD = .74$) and role reversed ones ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .79$, $ps < .001$).

A similar analysis was conducted on negative affect and yielded a significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 2713) = 4.56$, $p = .033$ and no effect of parenting arrangement, $F(2,$

2713) = 1.21, p = .30. The effect of gender was qualified by a significant two-way interaction, $F(2, 2713) = 2.54$, p = .08. Simple effects analyses (see Figure 4) indicated that mothers expressed higher negative effects (M = 2.10, SD = .74) than fathers (M = 1.94, SD = .72) among semi-traditional parents, $t(2186) = -5.06$, $p < .001$, whereas no significant differences were found between negative affect levels of equal-sharing mothers (M = 2.08, SD = .75) and fathers (M = 1.91, SD = .75), $t(344) = -1.94$, p = .054, and between mothers (M = 2.05, SD = .64) and fathers (M = 2.10, SD = .77) who reversed roles, $t(255) = .48$, p = .31. Post hoc Tukey tests indicated that caregiving fathers expressed higher levels of negative affect than primary breadwinning (p = .006) and equal-sharing fathers (p = .01), while mothers in all arrangements did not differ significantly in their levels of negative affect.

Analysis conducted on participants' life satisfaction revealed a main effect of gender, $F(1, 2713) = 29.97$, $p < .001$, and parenting arrangement, $F(2, 2713) = 9.19$, $p < .001$, with no significant gender x parenting arrangement interaction, $F(2, 2713) = 2.02$, p = .13. Simple effects analyses (see Figure 5) indicated that in each of the three parenting arrangements, fathers expressed lower satisfaction with life than mothers (semi-traditional: M = 4.78, SD = 1.42 and M = 5.08, SD = 1.38 for mothers and fathers respectively, $t(2196) = -4.91$, $p < .001$; equal-sharing: M = 4.97, SD = 1.24, M = 5.45, SD = 1.13, fathers and mothers respectively, $t(342) = 3.52$, $p < .001$; role reversed: M = 4.49, SD = 1.58, M = 5.06, SD = 1.44, fathers and mothers respectively, $t(255) = -2.99$, p = .002). Post hoc Tukey tests indicated that primary caregiving fathers expressed lower life satisfaction compared to primary breadwinning (p = .021) and equal-sharing fathers ($p < .001$), and equal-sharing mothers reported higher life satisfaction than primary caregiving (p = .005) and breadwinning mothers (p = .038).

Equivalent analysis conducted on the participants' self-esteem, revealed no main effect of gender, $F(1, 2713) = .24$, p = .63, or parenting arrangement, $F(2, 2713) = 1.62$, p = .20, but a significant two-way interaction was found, $F(2, 2713) = 17.10$, $p < .001$. Post hoc

Tukey tests indicated that caregiving fathers expressed lower self-esteem (M = 2.80, SD = .67) than primary breadwinning (M = 3.01, SD = .59, $t(1141) = 3.84$, $p < .001$) and equal-sharing fathers (M = 3.01, SD = .53, $t(255) = 3.21$, $p = .002$), while caregiving mothers manifested significantly lower self-esteem (M = 2.83, SD = .610) compared to breadwinning mothers (M = 3.08, SD = .66, $t(1304) = -4.18$, $p < .001$).

"Doing The Best I Can": Relationship with Children and Emotions

Despite considering having a good relationship and expressing positive emotions towards their relationships with their children, fathers and mothers in all arrangements saw themselves as 'doing the best they can' as a parent and not being perfect. For example, Nicole, a primary breadwinning mother explained:

> Motherhood to me seems like one a' those things where you have to just say at a certain point, 'you're doing your best'. It might not be the best but you are doing your own best. Cause I know that I'm not perfect at being a mum but I always like to try and think that I did my best with what I could do, even if that sometimes involves like losing your temper and stuff.

Fathers and mothers in all arrangements expressed high levels of satisfaction and admiration towards the kind of parent their partner was, and with the relationships they had with their children. However, they were a lot more critical when evaluating themselves as parents then when evaluating their partners' parenting.

> Well, I'm my own worst critic, so…I'm always deeply critical of myself and so I would always say I want to be a better father [laughs]. […] There's a lot of things I would like to improve on, to be a better dad for my kids (Edward, Primary caregiving father).
>
> I'm quite anxious and I suppose lacking in confidence, so I tend to, like, be quite critical. Maybe for some reason, for a good reason, and then other things maybe I'm

> like too self-critical. […] in general […] we (daughter and I) have a very good relationship, but then, like, if something goes wrong, I tend to get very stressed about that and very upset (Olivia, Primary caregiving mother).

Overall, parents in all arrangements expressed positive emotions towards their relationships with their children. They were more self-critical when reflecting on their role as parents notwithstanding considering themselves to have positive relationships with their children.

Discussion

This study examined how parents' relationship satisfaction, quality, and well-being vary within different family contexts, comparing parents in semi-traditional, equal-sharing and role-reversed arrangements. The findings reveal parents in semi-traditional arrangements reported lower relationship quality and positive affect than equal-sharers and role-reversed couples, echoing findings from previous research (e.g. Carlson et al., 2020; Chai & Schieman, 2023; Wikle & Yorgason, 2022). The results also revealed that equal-sharers and role-reversed couples were more likely to discuss their frustrations and make conscious attempts to resolve them.

Quantitative results demonstrated that women in semi-traditional arrangements had lower levels of relationship quality and life satisfaction when compared to women in equal-sharing and role-reversed arrangements. They also expressed lower relationship satisfaction when compared to mothers that share breadwinning and caregiving equally. Compared to mothers and fathers in other arrangements, mothers in semi-traditional arrangements were more likely to report in interviews disagreements and frustrations over parenting and division of tasks while their partners did not seem to notice or acknowledge any issues. The results partially corroborate previous research that found that equal-sharing mothers report average or above average relationship satisfaction (Kanji & Schober, 2014) and indicate that a greater

gendered division is associated with women's diminished sense of fairness and linked with lower marital quality overall (Lavee & Katz, 2002; Ruppanner et al., 2018).

Caregiving fathers expressed significantly higher levels of negative affect compared to equal-sharing and breadwinning fathers, confirming previous research that found that primary caregiving fathers report feeling stigmatised and socially isolated (Caperton et al., 2020; Rochlen et al., 2010). Additionally, caregiving fathers and mothers also expressed lower levels of self-esteem compared to parents in breadwinning and equal-sharing roles. Those differences are presumably related to the undervalue of care and lower status attached to caregiving. Similar results were found in previous studies showing that psychological well-being does not differ among primary caregiving fathers and mothers (Jones, Foley & Golombok, 2022) and that primary caregiving parents express psychological stress and low levels of emotional well-being (Caperton et al., 2020; Wikle & Yorgason, 2022).

Furthermore, qualitative results showed that parents in all arrangements considered having a good relationship and expressed positive emotions towards their relationship with their children but saw themselves as 'doing the best they can' and not being perfect.

By presenting an integrated picture of quantitative and qualitative insights, the current study enhances our understanding of how parents' relationship satisfaction, quality, and well-being vary across different family contexts. While most studies to date have focused on why marriage is associated with subjective well-being (e.g. DeMaris & Oates, 2022; Hu et al., 2024), our study examines the experiences of couples in three different arrangements and their distinct impact on relationship satisfaction, quality, and well-being. Additionally, the findings provide new insights into potential mechanisms through which relationships may affect parents' subjective well-being, showing that parents in family arrangements where caring responsibilities are shared equally or assumed primarily by the father express higher levels of relationship quality and positive affect. Limitations of this study must be

acknowledged. The over representation of middle class, well-educated parents, who identified as "white British", although relatively minor in our quantitative sample, was more prominent in the qualitative sample. Despite those characteristics being prevalent in role reversed and equal-sharing arrangements, these samples limit the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings regarding parents with different socio-demographic characteristics. In addition, the samples focused on heterosexual married or cohabitating couples who were parents of a young child, excluding other family structures (e.g., divorced, single, same-sex parents, etc.). Hence, future research can build on these findings to examine how these experiences differ across diverse samples. Moreover, even with the application of a convergent design, analysis and interpretation of data are never free from bias, and it is possible that an unconscious inclination to shape the data has occurred. Finally, previous research has demonstrated that the effect of having children on subjective well-being is moderated by the number and age of the children (Clark et al. 2008; Myrskylä & Margolis 2014). Future research could benefit from exploring the influence of children's age and the number of children on parents' relationship satisfaction, quality, and well-being. This mixed-methods comparative analysis highlights the significant implications of different family arrangements on fathers' and mothers' relationship quality, satisfaction, and well-being.

References

Adamsons, K. (2013). Predictors of relationship quality during the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, *31*(2), 160-171. https://doi.org/10.1080/02646838.2013.791919

Bertrand, M., Kamenica, E., & Pan, J. (2015). Gender identity and relative income within households. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *130*(2), 571– 614. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjv001

Blom, N., & Hewitt, B. (2020). Becoming a female-breadwinner household in Australia: Changes in relationship satisfaction. *Journal of Marriage and Family 82*(4), 1340–1357. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12653

Caperton, W., Butler, M., Kaiser, D., Connelly, J., & Knox, S. (2020). Stay-at-home fathers, depression, and help-seeking: A consensual qualitative research study. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, *21*(2), 235–250. https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000223

Carlson, D. L., Miller, A. J., & Rudd, S. (2020). Division of housework, communication, and couples' relationship satisfaction. *Socius, 6*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023120924805

Chai, L., & Schieman, S. (2023). What happens at home does not stay at home: Family-to-work conflict and the link between relationship strains and quality. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, *44*, 175–192. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-022-09821-8

Chesley, N. (2017). What does it mean to be a "breadwinner" mother? *Journal of Family Issues*, *38*(18), 2594–2619. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X16676857

Clark, A. E., Diener, E., Georgellis, Y., & Lucas, R. E. (2008). Lags and leads in life satisfaction: A test of the baseline hypothesis. *The Economic Journal*, *118*(529), 222–243. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0297.2008.02150.x

Cohen, S., & Janicki-Deverts, D. (2012). Who's stressed? Distributions of psychological stress in the United States in probability samples from 1983, 2006, and 2009. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *42*, 1320– 1334. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.00900.x.

Coleman, L., Shorto, S. & Ben-Galim, D. (2022). *Childcare Survey 2022*. https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Resource%20Library/Final%20Version%20Coram%20Childcare%20Survey%202022_0.pdf

DeMaris, A. & Longmore, M. (1996). Ideology, power, and equity: Testing competing explanations for the perception of fairness in household labor. *Social Forces, 74*, 1043-1071. https://doi.org/10.2307/2580392

DeMaris A., Oates G. (2022). The trajectory of subjective well-being: A partial explanation of the marriage advantage. *Journal of Family Issues*, 43(6), 1650–1668. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x211030033

Deutsch, F. & Gaunt, R. (2020). *Creating Equality at Home: How 25 Couples around the Globe Share Housework and Childcare*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Department for Education. (2021). *Education and training statistics for the UK*. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-and-training-statistics-for-the-uk

Diener, E. (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, *95*(3), 542-575. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.95.3.542

Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The Satisfaction with Life Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *49*(1), 71-75. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13

Eurofund (2021). *Part-time employment (%), by gender, 2018*. https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/employment/part-time-employment-gender-2018

Fischer, J., & Anderson, V. N. (2012). Gender role attitudes and characteristics of stay-at-home and employed fathers. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 13(1),* 16-31. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024359

Forste, R., & Fox, K. (2012). Household labor, gender roles, and family satisfaction: A cross-national comparison. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *43*(5), 613–631.

Fowers, B. J., & Olson, D. H. (1993). ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale: A brief research and clinical tool. *Journal of Family Psychology, 7*(2), 176-185. https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.7.2.176

Frey, B. S., & Stutzer, A. (2000). Happiness, economy and institutions. *The Economic Journal, 110,* 918–938. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0297.00570

Gaunt, R., Jordan, A., Tarrant, A., Chanamuto, N., Pinho, M., Wezyk, A. (2022). *Caregiving dads, breadwinning mums: Transforming gender in work and childcare?* Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363728351_Caregiving_dads_breadwinning_mums_Transforming_gender_in_work_and_childcare

Gill, P., Scacco, S., De Haan, S., Gent, A., Chapin, L., Ganci, M. & Morda, R. (2021). Getting into the "Dad Zone": How do primary caregiving fathers of young children experience social support? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *30,* 1028-1042. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-021-01919-1

Gillespie, B.J., Peterson, G. & Lever, J. (2019). Gendered perceptions of fairness in housework and shared expenses: Implications for relationship satisfaction and sex frequency. *PLoS ONE*, *14*(3), e0214204. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0214204

Hansen, T. (2012). Parenthood and happiness: A review of folk theories versus empirical evidence. *Social Indicators Research*, 108, 29–64. http://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9865-y

Holmes, E. K., Wikle, J., Thomas, C. R., Jorgensen, M. A., & Egginton, B. R. (2021). Social contact, time alone, and parental subjective well-being: A focus on stay-at-home fathers using the American Time Use Survey. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities, 22*(3), 488–499. https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000321

Hosley, R., Canfield, K., O'Donnell, S. L., & Roid, G. (2008). Father closeness: Its effect on married men's sexual behaviors, marital, and family satisfaction. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity: The Journal of Treatment & Prevention, 15*(1), 59–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/10720160701878761

Hu, Y., Zhang, R., Zhao, S., & Zhang, J. (2024). How and Why Marriage is Related to Subjective Well-Being? Evidence from Chinese Society. *Journal of Family Issues*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X241263785

Huss, B., & Pollmann-Schult, M. (2020). Relationship satisfaction across the transition to parenthood: The impact of conflict behavior. *Journal of Family Issues*, *41*(3), 383–411. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19876084

Jones, C., Foley, S., & Golombok, S. (2022). Parenting and child adjustment in families with primary caregiver fathers. *Journal of Family Psychology, 36*(3), 406–415. https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000915

Kanji, S. & Schober, P. (2014). Are couples with young children more likely to split up when the mother is the main or an equal earner? *Sociology*, 48, 38-58. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038512467710

Kaufman, G. (2013). *Superdads: How fathers balance work and family in the 21st century*. New York University Press.

King, T., Shields, M., Byars, S., Kavanagh, A., Craig, L. & Milner, A. (2020). Breadwinners and losers: Does the mental health of mothers, fathers, and children vary by household employment arrangements? Evidence from 7 waves of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, *189*(12), 1512–1520. https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwaa138

Kowalewska, H. & Vitali, A. (2023). The female-breadwinner well-being 'penalty': differences by men's (un)employment and country. *European Sociological Review*, jcad034. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcad034

Kramer, K. Z., & Pak, S. (2018). Relative earnings and depressive symptoms among working parents: Gender differences in the effect of relative income on depressive symptoms. *Sex Roles, 78*, 74–759. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0848-6

Lavee, Y., & Katz, R. (2002). Division of labor, perceived fairness, and marital quality: the effect of gender ideology. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *64* (1), 27-39. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2002.00027.x

Lawrence, E., Rothman, A. D., Cobb, R. J., Rothman, M. T., & Bradbury, T. N. (2008). Marital satisfaction across the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*(1), 41–50. https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.22.1.41

Linville, D., Chronister, K., Dishion, T., Todahl, J., Miller, J., Shaw, D., Gardner, F. & Wilson, M. (2010). A longitudinal analysis of parenting practices, couple satisfaction, and child behavior problems. *Journal of Marital & Family Therapy*, *36*(2), 244-255. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2009.00168.x

Margolis, R., & Myrskylä, M. (2011). A global perspective on happiness and fertility. *Population and Development Review, 37*(1), 29–56. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2011.00389.x

Meeussen, L., Van Laar, C. & Verbruggen, M. (2019). Looking for a family man? Norms for men are toppling in heterosexual relationships. *Sex Roles, 80,* 429–442. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0946-0

Mencarini, L. & Sironi, M. (2012). Happiness, housework and gender equality in Europe. *European Sociological Review, 28,* 203-219.

Musick, K., Meier, A., & Flood, S. (2016). How parents fare: Mothers' and fathers' subjective well-being in time with children. *American Sociological Review, 81*(5), 1069–1095. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122416663917

Neale, B. (2016). Journeys with data: Field enquiry and analysis. In *What is Qualitative Longitudinal Research?* (pp. 91-118). London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Nomaguchi, K. & Milkie, M.A. (2020). Parenthood and well-being: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 82,* 198-223. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12646

Office for National Statistics. (2020). *UK population by ethnicity*. https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2022). *Net Childcare Costs (indicator).* https://data.oecd.org/benwage/net-childcare-costs.htm

Pavot, W., & Diener, E. (2008). The Satisfaction with Life Scale and the emerging construct of life satisfaction. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 3,* 137–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760701756946

Petts, R. J. & Knoester, C. (2019). Paternity leave and parental relationships: Variations by gender and mothers' work statuses. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 81,* 468-486. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12545

Pinho, M., Gaunt, R. & Gross, R. (2021). Caregiving dads, breadwinning mums: Pathways to the division of family roles among role-reversed and traditional parents. *Marriage and Family Review*, *57*(4), 346-374. https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2021.1875102

Pinho, M., Wezyk, A., Jordan, A., Gaunt, R., Tarrant, A., & Chanamuto, N. (2024). "A choice we had to fight for": Perceived choice and satisfaction with the division of family roles among equal sharers, role-reversed and traditional parents.

Rauch-Anderegg, V., Kuhn, R., Milek, A., Halford, W. K., & Bodenmann, G. (2020). Relationship behaviors across the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Family Issues, 41*(4), 483–506. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19878864

Rochlen, A. B., McKelley, R. A., Suizzo, M.-A., & Scaringi, V. (2008). Predictors of relationship satisfaction, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction among stay-at-home fathers. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, *9*, 17-28. https://doi.org/10.1037/1524-9220.9.1.17

Rochlen, A. B. & McKelley, R. A. (2009). Working therapeutically with stay-at-home fathers. *Counseling Fathers*, 207–230.

Rochlen, A. B., McKelley, R. A., & Whittaker, T. A. (2010). Stay-at-home fathers' reasons for entering the role and stigma experiences: A preliminary report. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities, 11*, 279-285. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017774

Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ruppanner, L. (2008). Fairness and housework: A cross-national comparison. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *39*(4), 509-526. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.39.4.509

Ruppanner, L., Brandén, M., & Turunen, J. (2018). Does unequal housework lead to divorce? evidence from Sweden. *Sociology*, *52*(1), 75–94. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038516674664

Ruppanner, L., Perales, F. & Baxter, J. (2019). Harried and unhealthy? Parenthood, time pressure, and mental health. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 81(2), 308-326. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12531

Sanders, R., Lehmann, J., & Gardner, F. (2022). Parents' emotional responses to early parenthood. *Journal of Family Issues*, *43*(7), 1874–1897. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X211030024

Schieman, S., Ruppanner, L., & Milkie, M. A. (2018). Who helps with homework? Parenting inequality and relationship quality among employed mothers and fathers. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, *39*(1), 49-65. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-017-9545-4

Schulz, M. S., Cowan, C. P., & Cowan, P. A. (2006). Promoting healthy beginnings: a randomized controlled trial of a preventive intervention to preserve marital quality during the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *74*(1), 20-31. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.74.1.20

Sheeran, P., Abrams, D., & Orbell, S. (1995). Unemployment, self-esteem, and depression: A social comparison theory approach. *Basic & Applied Social Psychology*, *17*(1/2), 65-82. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp1701&2_4

Syrda, J. (2019). Spousal relative income and male psychological distress. *Personality and Social Psychological Bulletin*, *46*, 976– 992. https://doi.org/10.1177/2F0146167219883611

Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*(6), 1063-1070. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.54.6.1063

Wikle, J. S., & Yorgason, J. B. (2022). Married mixed-gender couples' midlife employment and later life well-being and housework. *Sex Roles*, *87*, 154-166. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-022-01306-0

Winefield, A. H., Tiggemann, M., & Winefield, H. R. (1992). Unemployment distress, reasons for job loss and causal attributions for unemployment in young people. *Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology*, *65*(3), 213-218. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8325.1992.tb00499.x

Zimmerman, T. S. (2000). Marital equality and satisfaction in stay-at-home mother and stay-at-home father families. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, *22*, 337-354. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007816725358

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between the Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	Fathers' *M*	Fathers' *SD*
1. Relationship quality	--	.64***	.35***	-.35***	.52***	.39***	3.75	0.75
2. Relationship satisfaction	.77***	--	.26***	-.18***	.45***	.25***	5.57	1.40
3. Postive affect	.35***	.27***	--	-.18***	.45***	.47***	3.20	0.77
4. Negative affect	-.36***	-.27***	-.28***	--	-.36***	-.54***	1.95	0.73
5. Life satisfaction	.58***	.49***	.52***	-.40***	--	.58***	4.78	1.42
6. Self-esteem	.36***	.23***	.52***	-.55***	.52***	--	2.99	0.59
Mothers' *M*	3.68	5.57	3.15	2.09	5.11	2.86		
Mothers' *SD*	0.84	1.38	0.80	0.74	1.37	0.62		

Note. Correlations for fathers are presented above the diagonal, for mothers, below the diagonal. Higher scores reflect higher levels of the construct.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Figure 1

Relationship Quality by Gender and Parenting Arrangement

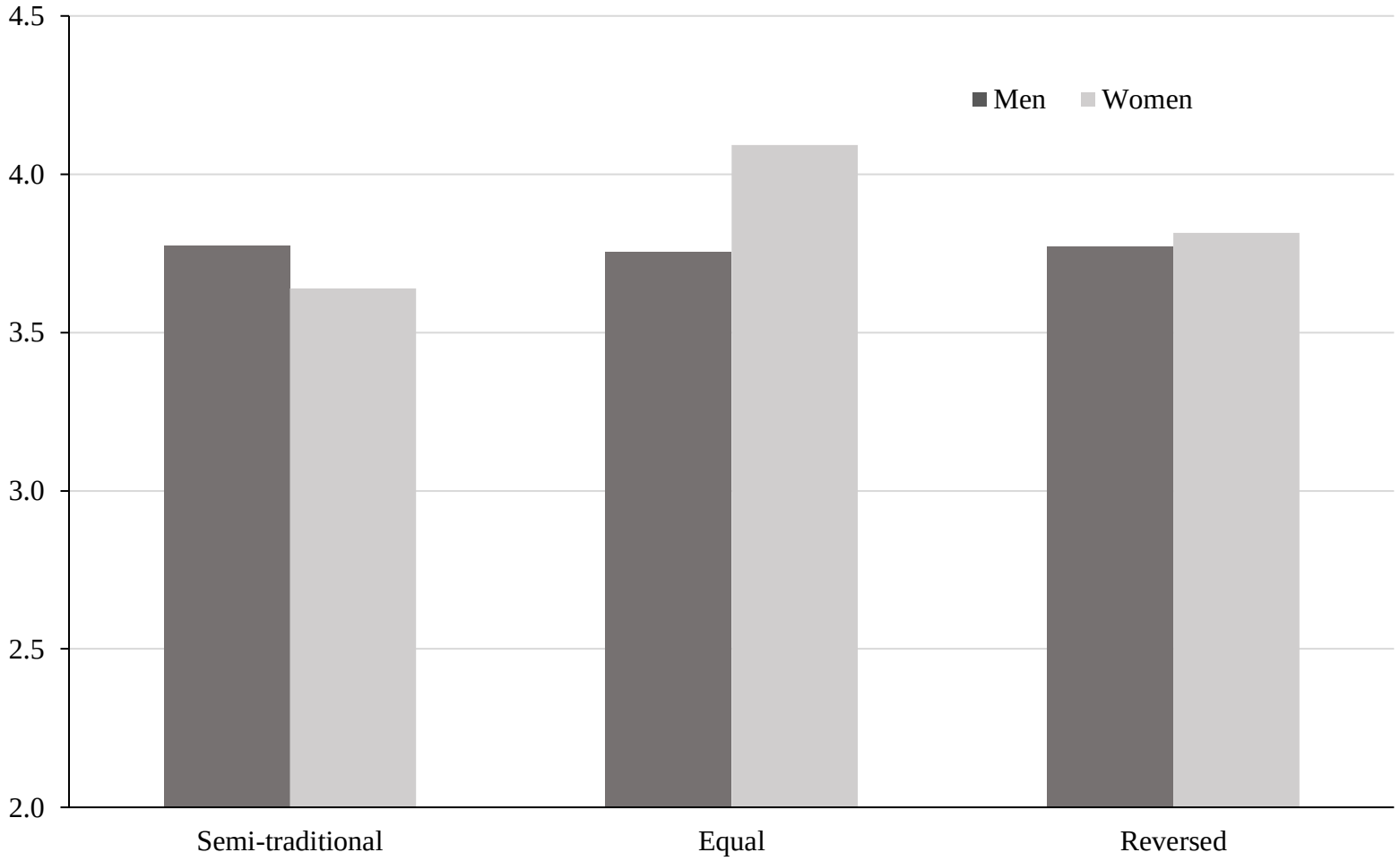

Figure 2

Relationship Satisfaction by Gender and Parenting Arrangement

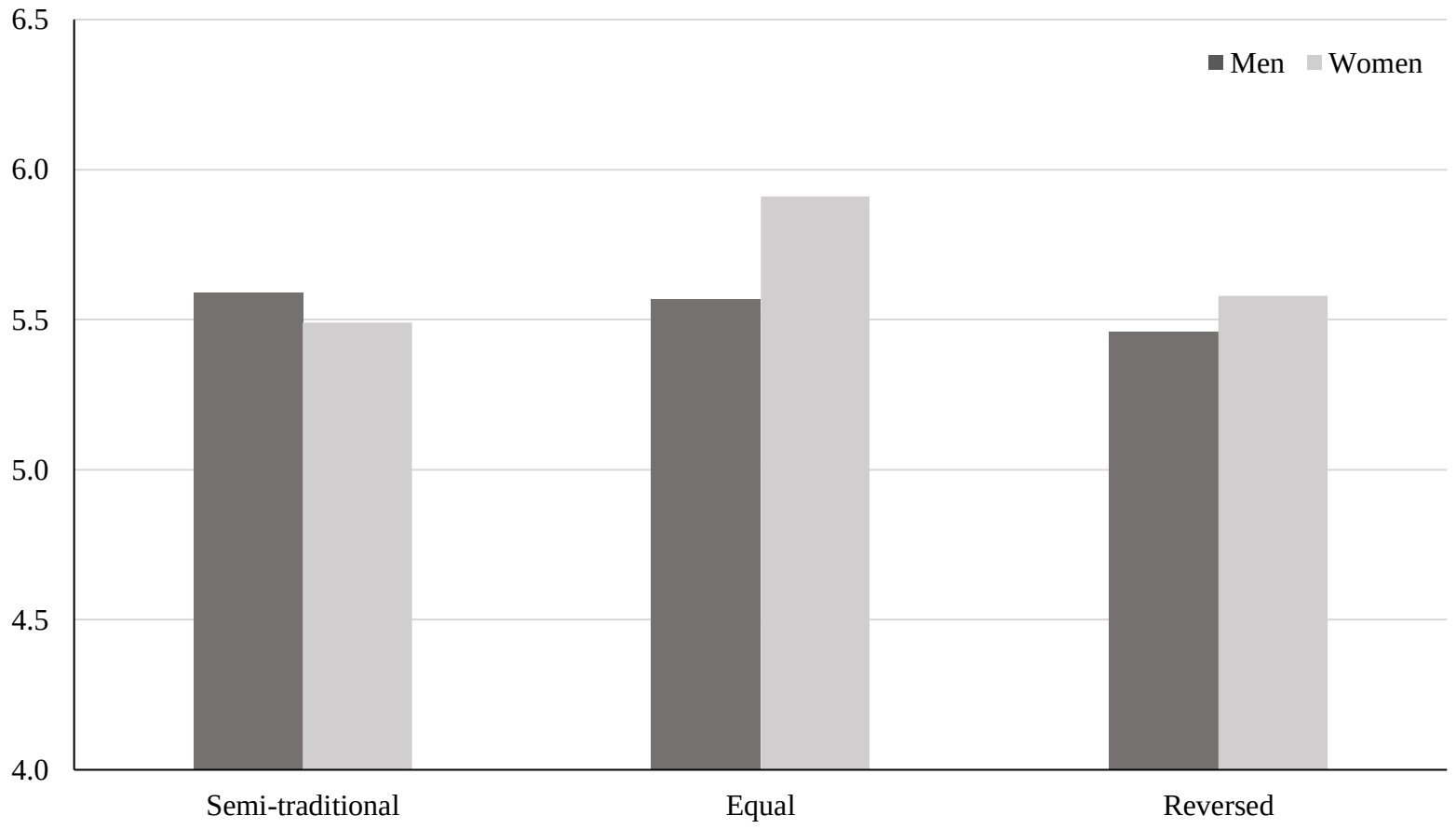

Figure 3

Positive Affect by Gender and Parenting Arrangement

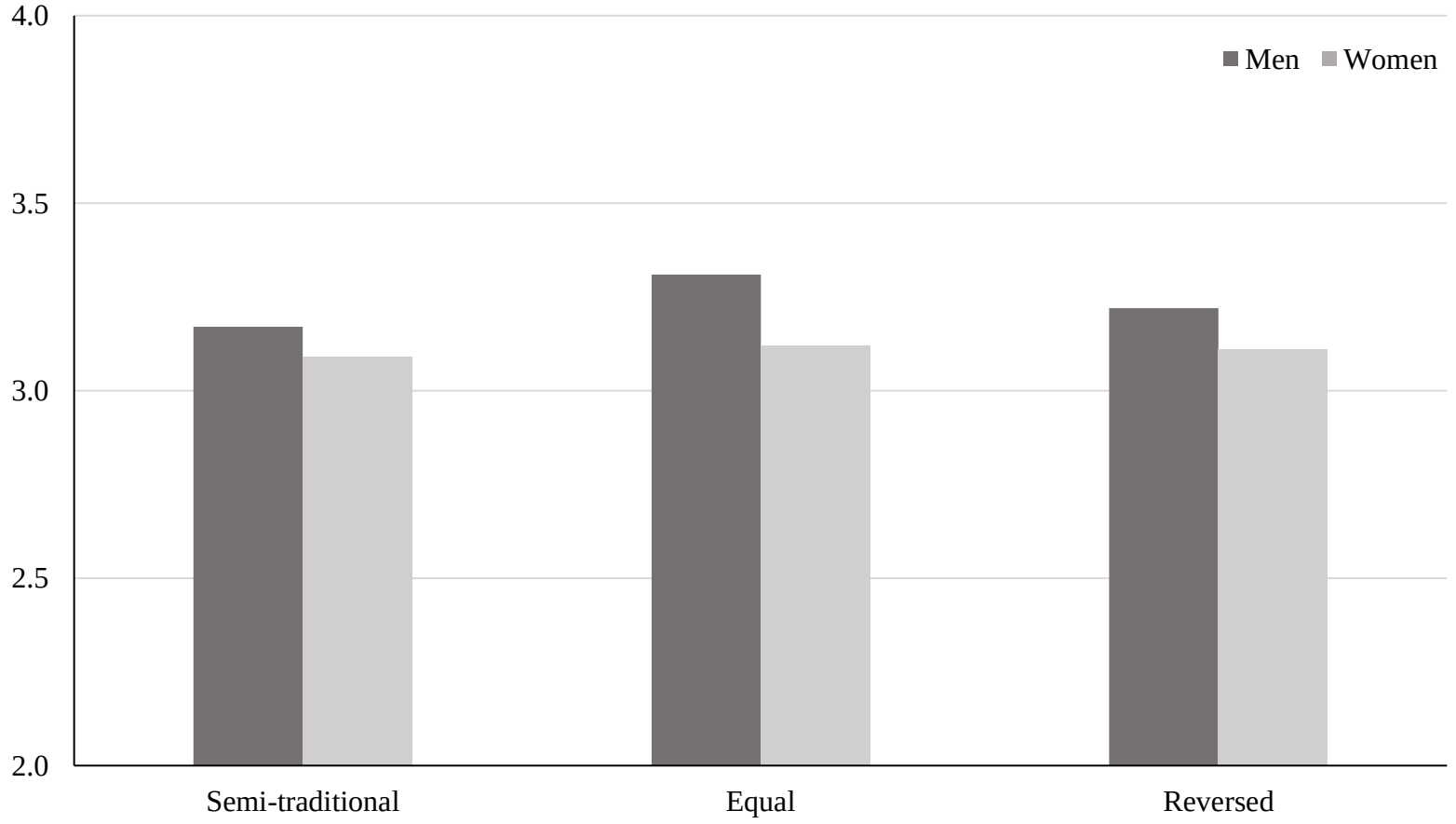

Figure 4

Negative Affect by Gender and Parenting Arrangement

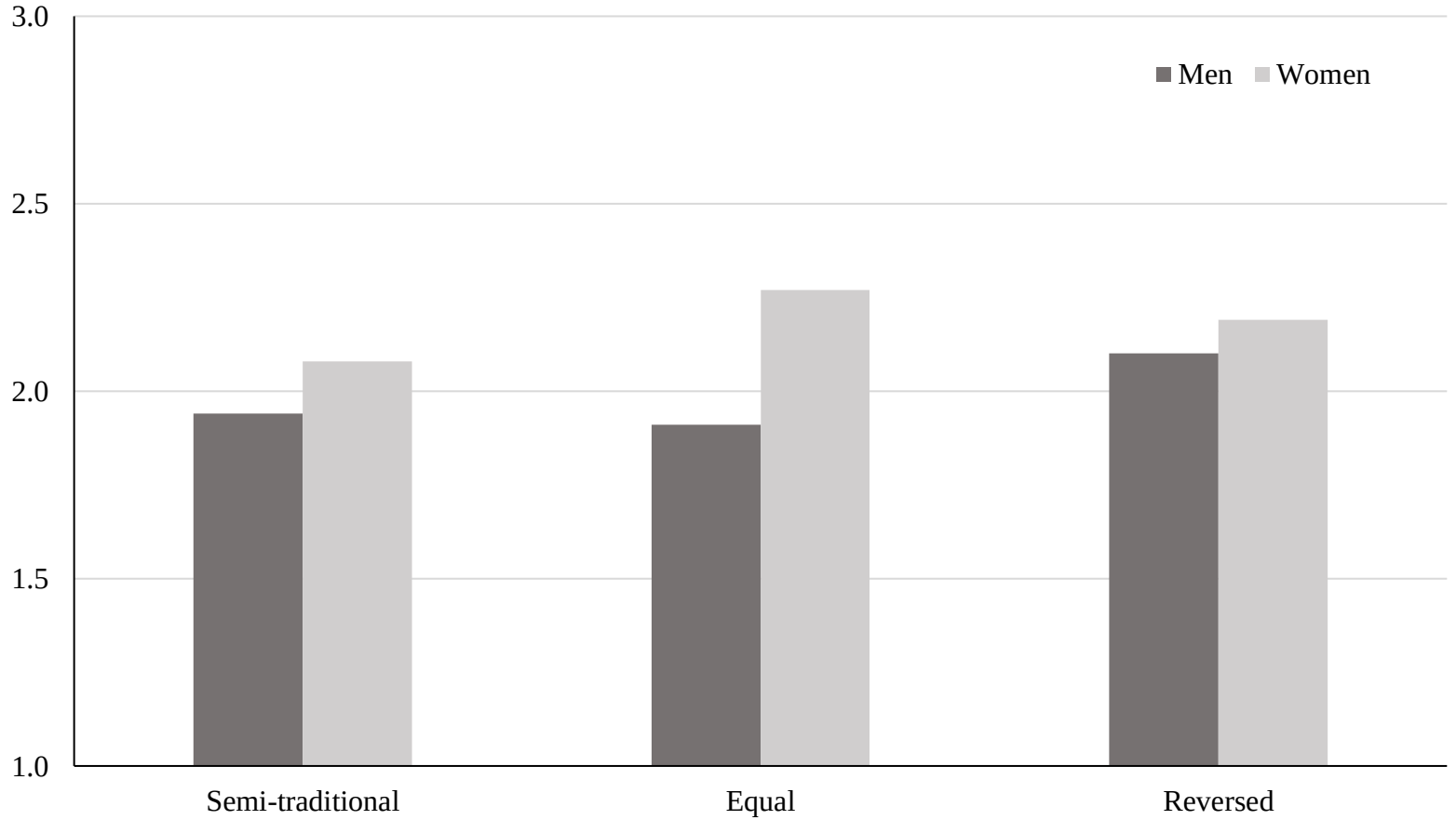

Figure 5

Life Satisfaction by Gender and Parenting Arrangement

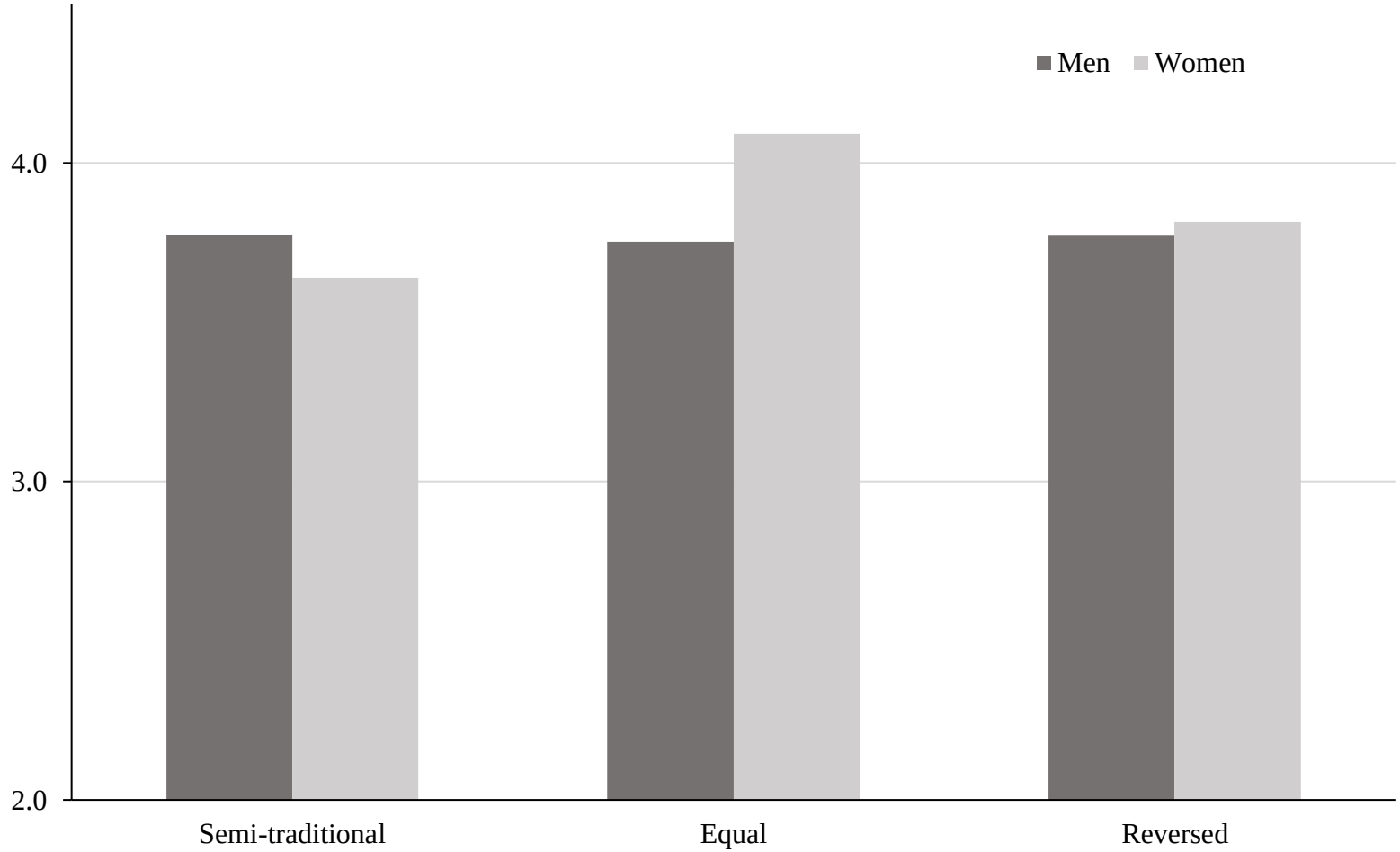

Figure 6

Self-Esteem by Gender and Parenting Arrangement