

The partner penalty: Exploring tourism jobs and life satisfaction relationships

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how tourism employment affects life satisfaction — not only for workers themselves, but also for their partners — using European Social Survey data from 30 countries (2002–2022). Tourism workers report lower life satisfaction, which is largely attributable to socioeconomic factors. However, partners of tourism workers experience an even larger reduction in life satisfaction — a ‘partner penalty’ exceeding the estimated effect of divorce. This life satisfaction penalty for partners is concentrated among men and families with children, suggesting that gender norms and caregiving responsibilities play a central role. Notably, dual-tourism couples do not exhibit this penalty, consistent with shared occupational understanding. Proxy indicators suggest time-based work-family conflict, including disrupted family time and reduced social interactions, as a plausible mechanism.

1. Introduction

Human resources in hospitality and the broader tourism industry have long been confronted with structural and systemic challenges (Baum, 2015; Ladkin, 2011; Robinson et al., 2019). Labor shortages have disproportionately struck tourism employers during post-pandemic recovery (Baum et al., 2020; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023), which have been attributed to low wages and poor working conditions (Maggi & Vroegop, 2023; Zwysen, 2023) rather than to skill shortages (Kiss et al., 2022). Besides, this shift has been linked to a growing emphasis on family responsibilities (Croes et al., 2021), with numerous workers opting to dedicate more time to loved ones over professional commitments (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023).

Unlike many other industries, tourism jobs typically involve long, unpredictable, and countercyclical working hours, which can adversely affect mental health, leisure time and family life (Robinson et al., 2019). Such working conditions are closely associated with work-family conflict, wherein the demands of professional responsibilities interfere with family roles and responsibilities (O'Neill & Follmer, 2020).

While work-to-family conflict in the tourism sector has been explored to some extent (Karatepe & Baddar, 2006; O'Neill & Follmer, 2020), perspectives of tourism workers' partners have received scant attention, with a few notable exceptions (Cleveland et al., 2007;

Krannitz et al., 2015). Scrutinizing this interaction is essential as partners play a pivotal role in shaping the family environment, and partnership quality has been strongly associated with individual life satisfaction (Stahnke & Cooley, 2020) as well as job-related decisions (Ferguson et al., 2016).

Beyond this relational blind spot, existing research is also limited in its ability to capture how tourism job characteristics are associated with life satisfaction across diverse national and organizational contexts. Most evidence is drawn from narrow institutional settings, leaving open the question of whether observed work-family dynamics generalize across countries and employment regimes. This limitation has led several scholars to call for more comprehensive, cross-contextual examinations of work-family conflict in the tourism industry (O'Neill & Follmer, 2020; Zhao, 2016).

The present study addresses these gaps, providing several contributions to the literature on subjective well-being and work-family conflict related to the tourism workforce.

First, it provides the first large-scale, cross-national empirical evidence on how tourism employment relates to life satisfaction not only for workers themselves but – critically – also for their partners, an understudied perspective in tourism research. Surprisingly, after controlling for socio-economic and household characteristics, we find no evidence of lower life satisfaction among tourism workers. In contrast,

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individuals whose partners are employed in the tourism industry report significantly lower satisfaction with life compared to respondents with partners employed in other sectors.

Second, drawing on 20 years of European Social Survey data across 30 countries, the current research offers substantially broader empirical coverage than previous single-country or single-organization studies. This enables assessing whether the observed patterns are robust across different time periods and institutional contexts. The present results are consistent over time and across countries with heterogeneous labor market conditions.

Third, the analysis moves beyond average associations by systematically examining heterogeneity across gender, household composition, and caregiving responsibilities. The results indicate that the partner penalty¹ is concentrated within specific demographic subgroups – particularly among male respondents and households with children and multiple caregiving responsibilities – rather than being uniformly distributed across the population.

Fourth, informed by family systems theory and conservation of resources theory, we identify time-based work-family conflict – such as family time displacement – as a key interpretive mechanism linking partner employment in tourism to life satisfaction, a pathway that has received limited attention in prior research.

Finally, the findings have relevant implications for industry work-force strategies and public policy, highlighting the importance of well-being policies tailored to specific family and partnership needs. Findings suggest that family-friendly scheduling interventions may help address structural human resource challenges in the tourism industry by improving well-being not only for workers but also for their partners, thereby enhancing overall labor market outcomes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Jobs and life satisfaction

Research in organizational psychology and labor economics has established robust associations between employment characteristics and life satisfaction (Obrenovic et al., 2020; Orellana et al., 2023). At the individual level, job satisfaction and life satisfaction are reciprocally related, with longitudinal evidence indicating that life satisfaction more strongly predicts subsequent job satisfaction than the reverse (Bialowolski & Weziak-Bialowolska, 2021).

More broadly, employment stability, working conditions, and work-family balance emerge as key determinants of subjective well-being, which in turn is associated with favorable work-related outcomes, including higher performance, stronger organizational commitment, and lower turnover intentions (Erdogan et al., 2012).

Importantly, the consequences of employment extend beyond individual workers. Partner's employment characteristics are also associated with individual life satisfaction through economic, temporal, and emotional spillover mechanisms (Inanc, 2018). Despite this broader understanding of work-life linkages at the household level, tourism workforce research on micro-level themes has concentrated predominantly on worker attitudes and behaviors (Baum et al., 2016), devoting comparatively little attention to partner perspectives and family well-being.

Within the tourism literature, empirical evidence on life satisfaction remains fragmented (Saito et al., 2025). Existing studies typically

concentrate on specific occupational groups – such as frontline employees (as defined by Zhao et al., 2016) or tour guides (Mackenzie & Raymond, 2020) – or on specific businesses, most commonly hotels (Qu & Zhao, 2012). As a result, analyses of life satisfaction that span different job roles and business types within the sector remain scarce (Ciarlante et al., 2024). While some cross-national evidence exists for job satisfaction at the European level (Díaz-Carrión et al., 2020), systematic evidence on how heterogeneous working conditions in tourism affect workers' life satisfaction – and that of their partners – remains largely absent (Zhao & Ghiselli, 2016).

Moreover, partner perspectives have received scant empirical attention. One of the few notable exceptions is a study by Krannitz et al. (2015) investigating emotional labor of hotel managers and its impact on partners' perceptions of work-family conflict. They show that hotel managers' surface acting is directly associated with their partners' desire for them to quit their job and indirectly related to the partners' perception of work-family conflict. Similarly, Cleveland et al. (2007) demonstrate that long and unpredictable working hours in the tourism industry do not only generate stress for employees but also have significant adverse repercussions for their families.

2.2. Work-family conflict

Work-family conflict has been extensively examined in the literature on the work-home interface (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Greenhaus and Beutell (1985, p. 77) define work-family conflict as “a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect.” By contrast, work-family enrichment refers to situations in which experiences in one domain positively spill over into the other (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

The literature commonly distinguishes among three types of work-family conflict: time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), a classification that has received broad empirical support (Allen et al., 2000). Time-based conflict arises when time devoted to one role constrains the ability to fulfill demands in another role. Strain-based conflict occurs when stress or exhaustion generated in one domain impairs performance in the other. Behavior or role-based conflict emerges when behaviors required in one role are incompatible with expectations in another role.

A substantial body of research shows that work-family conflict has detrimental consequences for individuals' health, professional outcomes, family life, and overall life satisfaction (Hill, 2005; Minnotte et al., 2015). These negative effects are particularly pronounced in occupations characterized by irregular or unsocial working hours, such as weekend or holiday work, which intensify tensions between professional and family responsibilities (Medina-Garrido et al., 2023). Such temporal irregularities disrupt family routines and schedules, contributing to physical and emotional fatigue.

This fatigue not only undermines employees' health and subjective well-being but also strains family relationships, often generating feelings of guilt associated with limited family presence. The adverse consequences of work-family conflict are also evident in everyday work-life interactions. For instance, end-of-workday strain has been shown to reduce life satisfaction among full-time employees (Matthews et al., 2012), while perceived spillovers from work to family life are associated with higher psychological distress and increased job exhaustion (Kinnunen et al., 2006).

These dynamics are especially salient in the tourism industry. Empirical studies indicate that work-family conflict in this context exacerbates stress and burnout (Mansour & Tremblay, 2016; Zhao & Ghiselli, 2016), increases absenteeism (Karatepe & Karadas, 2014), heightens turnover intentions (Vanderpool & Way, 2013), and reduces job satisfaction (Lee et al., 2015). Consistent with this evidence, a meta-analysis of hospitality employees shows that work demands intruding on family life are significantly associated with lower life satisfaction (Zhao et al., 2020).

¹ We term ‘partner penalty’ the statistical association between having a partner employed in tourism and the respondent's lower reported life satisfaction. This term refers to an empirical regularity observed in our data, not a moral or behavioral judgment about partnerships. Importantly, the partner penalty reflects the respondent's lower life satisfaction when their partner works in tourism, which differs conceptually from partnership dissolution or marital quality.

Beyond well-being outcomes, work-family conflict also shapes broader labor market behavior. Job-related decisions – such as quitting, relocating, changing career paths, or initiating job searches – have been shown to be strongly influenced by family dynamics and the presence of work-family conflict (Forma, 2009).

2.3. Research gaps and research questions

Despite increasing attention to work-family conflict in the tourism realm, important gaps remain in our understanding of how employment in this industry affects workers' and partners' subjective well-being.

Existing studies rely predominantly on single-country, single-organization, or occupation-specific samples, which limit the generalizability of findings across institutional and national contexts. Moreover, while work-to-family conflict among tourism workers is well documented, partner perspectives – and particularly potential consequences for partners' subjective well-being – remain largely unexplored.

Evidence is also scarce on whether these associations vary across gender roles, family structure, and caregiving responsibilities. Finally, the mechanisms linking tourism employment to workers' and partners' life satisfaction remain insufficiently understood, including whether these operate primarily through time-based, strain-based, or role-based forms of work-family conflict.

To address these limitations, this study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks: conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974). Conservation of resources theory conceptualizes work-family conflict as a stress response to actual or threatened loss of key resources, such as time, energy, and social support. Family systems theory, in turn, emphasizes the interdependence of partners, suggesting that work-related stressors experienced by one partner can spill over and affect the well-being of the other. Taken together, these frameworks allow us to conceptualize work-family conflict in tourism as both an individual and a relational process. Guided by these theoretical perspectives, we investigate three related research questions.

We first examine whether employment in the tourism industry – either directly, through a partner, or through dual employment within the couple – is associated with lower reported life satisfaction. We then assess whether the association between partner employment in tourism and reported life satisfaction varies by gender in the light of social reproductive gender roles, as well as by family composition, with particular attention to caregiving responsibilities (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007; Shockley et al., 2017). Finally, we examine which types of work-family conflict are most strongly associated with tourism employment for workers and their partners.

3. Methods

3.1. Data

To examine associations between tourism occupations and reported life satisfaction across diverse geographical contexts and over an extended timeframe, the present study utilizes data from 10 waves of the European/ Social Survey (European Social Survey, 2024). This cross-national survey was conducted in 30 countries between 2002 and 2022,² and is designed to investigate social values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes among representative populations³ in participating countries.

The European Social Survey administers standardized biennial surveys with consistent core questions and rotating modules. Data cover subjective well-being, socio-demographics, household composition, and

occupational details using ISCO (International Standard Classification of Occupations) and NACE (Statistical Classification of Economic Activities in the European Community) classifications. Interviews follow rigorous standardized protocols ensuring cross-national comparability.⁴ Recent waves (60% of sample) include regional data (NUTS 1–2 levels⁵) enabling geographic analysis.

This study consolidates 10 European Social Survey rounds (2002–2022), encompassing approximately 404,000 respondents across 30 countries, providing robust temporal and geographic coverage for examining tourism employment relationships with life satisfaction.

Tourism-related jobs are selected following the ILO classification proposal (International Labour Organization, 2008), a draft group definition provided by ILO to classify occupations in tourism and hospitality. Occupations include hotel managers, restaurant managers, travel attendants and travel stewards, transport conductors, travel guides, waiters, kitchen helpers, bartenders, hotel receptionists, cooks and chefs. The complete list of jobs is reported in the Web Appendix (Section A, Tables A.1 and A.2).

Unlike Baum et al. (2023), the current sample does not include occupations such as telephonists, sport assistants, human resources administrative roles, or customer service supervisors. This divergence stems from the distinct ISCO coding framework (between ISCO and UK codes) and a closer adherence to Eurostat's NACE-based tourism sector definitions.⁶

The four-digit ISCO occupation codes combined with NACE sector codes permit us to construct key independent variables. These are three mutually exclusive binary indicators that capture whether (1) the respondent is employed in tourism; (2) the respondent's partner is employed in tourism; or (3) both partners are employed in tourism. These indicators are mutually exclusive by construction, so that the category of 'both' tourism-employed partners is identified separately and does not contaminate the individual worker or partner estimates.

The final sample comprises 19,156 individuals employed in tourism jobs, 5,094 respondents working in other industries who have a partner employed in the tourism sector, and 899 respondents employed in the tourism sector whose partner is also employed in the sector.

Summary statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1, segmented by respondents' employment status in tourism. Satisfaction with life is measured using the standard European Social Survey question: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?" with responses on an 11-point scale (0 = extremely dissatisfied, 10 = extremely satisfied). The self-reported life satisfaction represents subjective well-being rather than objective well-being measures and is widely used in cross-national well-being studies (Ferrer-i-Carbonell & Frijters, 2004). The full list of measurement items and response scales for the key variables is reported in the Web Appendix (Section B).

Initial observations indicate that tourism workers are on average younger, more likely to be female, have lower levels of education, are more frequently born abroad, and are more likely to have experienced recent unemployment than other respondents. On average, tourism employees work fewer hours than respondents in other occupations. In contrast, partners of tourism employees report working more hours than partners of respondents in other jobs. Finally, household income and life satisfaction are, on average, lower among tourism workers.

Nevertheless, regional analysis using data from the last five waves of the European Social Survey (2012–2022) reveals noteworthy heterogeneity, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

⁴ More details can be found at <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>

⁵ Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (EU): level 1 are major socio-economic regions; level 2 are basic regions.

⁶ The tourism industry comprises the following NACE classes: H491, H4932, H4939, H501, H503, H511, I551, I552, I553, I561, I563, N771, N7721 and division N79.

² Note that some countries had data available for only a subset of waves.

³ The national samples in each country-round are representative of residents aged 15 and over.

Table 1
Summary statistics by tourism employment status.

	Respondents without tourism jobs		Respondents with tourism jobs	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Satisfaction with life (from 0 to 10)	6.76	2.32	6.69	2.37
Partner employed in tourism	0.01	0.10	0.04	0.20
<i>Respondent control variables</i>				
Age	46.84	18.81	42.86	18.86
Female	0.51	0.50	0.67	0.47
Education level (ISCED level, from 1 to 5)	3.18	1.35	2.78	1.20
Divorced/separated	0.09	0.28	0.10	0.30
Widowed	0.08	0.27	0.08	0.27
Married/registered union	0.53	0.50	0.42	0.49
Religiousness (1 = not at all religious, 10 = very religious)	4.57	3.02	4.50	3.09
Subjective general health (1 = very good, 5 = very bad)	2.30	0.92	2.27	0.92
Permanently sick/disabled	0.02	0.15	0.02	0.15
Unemployed (currently)	0.04	0.20	0.07	0.26
Unemployed in the last year	0.13	0.34	0.17	0.38
Member of discriminated group	0.08	0.27	0.09	0.28
Victim of assault (last 5 years)	0.17	0.38	0.21	0.41
Living in big city	0.20	0.40	0.20	0.40
Living in suburbs/outskirts of big city	0.11	0.31	0.11	0.31
Living in small city/town	0.34	0.47	0.36	0.48
Living in country village	0.31	0.46	0.30	0.46
Living on a farm/home in countryside	0.04	0.18	0.03	0.17
Born in the country	0.91	0.29	0.85	0.36
<i>Respondent job control variables</i>				
Employed	0.77	0.42	0.87	0.34
Self-employed	0.10	0.30	0.10	0.30
Family business	0.01	0.11	0.02	0.15
Trade union member	0.14	0.34	0.07	0.26
Average weekly worked hours	37.22	17.29	35.64	20.31
<i>Partner control variables</i>				
Education level (ISCED level, from 1 to 5)	3.10	1.50	2.70	1.40
Employed	0.48	0.50	0.46	0.50
Self-employed	0.08	0.27	0.08	0.27
Family business	0.01	0.10	0.01	0.09
Average weekly worked hours	39.61	13.46	41.17	13.25
Permanently sick/disabled	0.00	0.06	0	0.06
<i>Household control variables</i>				
Household income national decile	4.36	3.35	3.66	3.10
Household income feeling (1 = living comfortably, 4 = very difficult)	2.07	0.87	2.16	0.86
Household members	2.88	1.41	2.93	1.45
Living with partner	0.59	0.49	0.50	0.50
Household members, from 0 to 4 years	0.12	0.38	0.13	0.39
Household members, from 65 to 74 years	0.12	0.34	0.10	0.32
Household members, 75 years and over	0.08	0.28	0.06	0.26
Number of children in the household	0.66	0.98	0.62	0.98
Number of parents in the household	0.33	0.70	0.41	0.76

Notes: Statistics are representative of the national populations in the sample. The non-tourism group includes retirees, non-workers, and respondents with investment income. Values of partner variables are conditional on having a partner. Working hours are conditional on having a job. Total sample size is 404,458.

At the regional level, tourism workers display substantial variation in life satisfaction, with higher reported levels in certain regions. This suggests that specific regional contexts may partially offset the challenges associated with tourism employment.

3.2. Estimation strategy

Our analysis proceeds in three stages. First, we estimate baseline associations between tourism employment (respondent, partner, or both) and life satisfaction using OLS regression with comprehensive controls and country-year fixed effects (Eq. 1). Second, we examine heterogeneity through systematic segmentation by gender, household composition, and caregiving responsibilities to identify which subgroups exhibit the partner penalty. Third, we investigate potentially

underlying mechanisms by analyzing responses to specialized European Social Survey rotating module questions regarding time-based, strain-based, and role-based work-family conflict.

Consistent with the empirical literature on subjective well-being (Ferrer-i-Carbonell & Frijters, 2004; Ferrer-i-Carbonell & Ramos, 2014; Ivlevs, 2017; Okulicz-Kozaryn & Strzelecka, 2017), we employ OLS regression to estimate the association between tourism employment and life satisfaction. Although this approach assumes cardinality of the life satisfaction measure, it enables straightforward interpretation. Ordered probit and logit models, which are robust to the absence of cardinality assumption, yield comparable results (Web Appendix, Section C, Table C.1).

The general model is specified as follows:

$$SWL_{ict} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 TJ_{respondent}_{ict} + \beta_2 TJ_{partner}_{ict} + \beta_3 TJ_{both}_{ict} + \beta_4 resp_{controls}_{ict} + \beta_5 resp_{job}_{controls}_{ict} + \beta_6 hh_{controls}_{ict} + \beta_7 partner_{job}_{controls}_{ict} + \theta_{ct} + \varepsilon_{ict} \quad (1)$$

where SWL_{ict} is the life satisfaction of individual i , in country c , at time t .

$TJ_{respondent}_{ict}$, $TJ_{partner}_{ict}$ and TJ_{both}_{ict} are binary variables equal to one if the respondent, the partner, or both are employed in tourism jobs (they uniquely identify each case); $resp_{controls}_{ict}$ are variables controlling for individual characteristics of the respondent; $resp_{job}_{controls}_{ict}$ is a set of variables controlling for the job characteristics of the respondent; $hh_{controls}_{ict}$ is a set of attributes related to the respondent's family characteristics while $partner_{job}_{controls}_{ict}$ includes the characteristics of the partner's job and education (all control variables are listed in Table 1).

Lastly, θ_{ct} is a set of binary variables controlling for the country-year pairs fixed effects, and ε_{ict} is an error term. Country-year fixed effects account for all the country-year specific factors that affect respondents living in the same country in any given year.

According to this formulation, β_1 captures the average national difference in life satisfaction of respondents having a job in tourism, after controlling for all the observed and unobserved variables that affect all the respondents in a given country for each year. Similarly, β_2 and β_3 capture the average national difference of having a partner employed in a tourism job, and if both partners work in the industry, respectively. The current analysis employs multiway clustering (countries and years) for standard errors to address temporal and spatial correlation. Estimates incorporate design and population weights following European Social Survey guidelines, ensuring national sample representativeness.

4. Results

4.1. OLS regression results

The analysis reveals several noteworthy associations. Table 2, Model 1 reports the raw, unadjusted association between tourism employment and life satisfaction. Without control variables, both workers and their partners report lower life satisfaction (−0.23 and −0.25, respectively) compared to other respondents. These estimates are likely to reflect omitted variable bias, as they do not yet account for individual, household, and job-related characteristics. Once these controls are progressively introduced, the negative association is no longer statistically significant for tourism workers (Models 3–6), indicating that individual characteristics largely account for the association between tourism employment and life satisfaction.

In contrast, the negative association between the partner's employment in tourism and respondent's life satisfaction persists across all models, indicating more robust evidence. This 'partner penalty' is both statistically significant and substantively meaningful. For scale, the

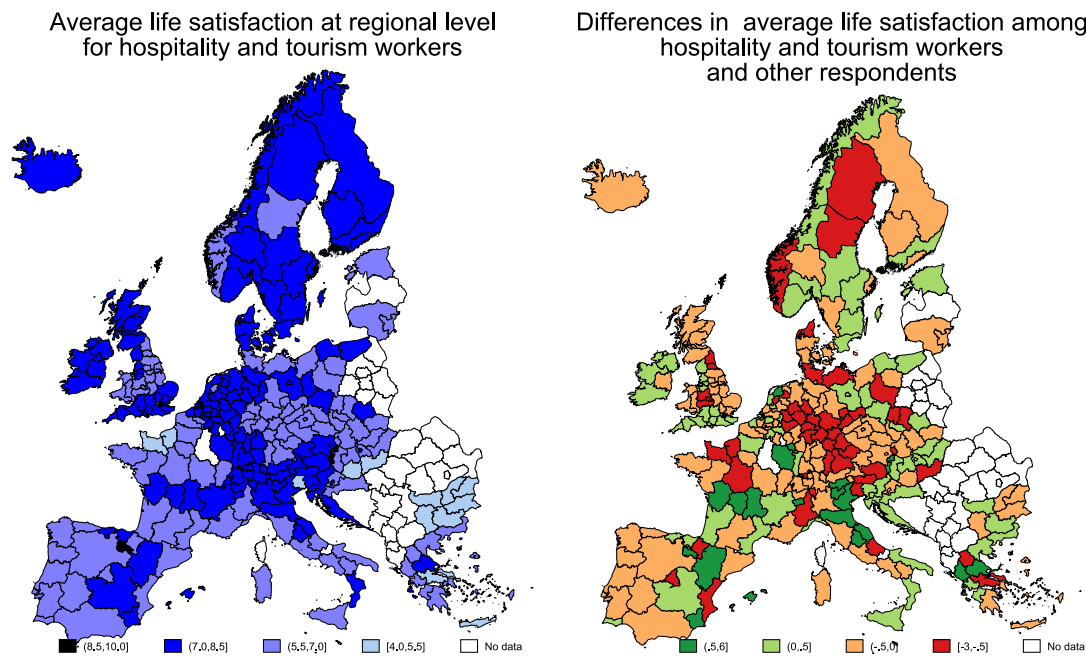


Fig. 1. Life satisfaction in European regions (2012–2022). Notes: These figures report the average life satisfaction of respondents employed in hospitality and tourism jobs in European regions and differences between groups. In the figure on the right, green indicates higher life satisfaction among tourism workers versus other respondents.

Table 2
Life satisfaction and tourism employment, full sample.

Model	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Satisfaction with life</i>						
<i>Tourism employment</i>						
Worker	−0.229*** (0.07)	−0.090* (0.05)	−0.048 (0.04)	−0.044 (0.04)	0.019 (0.04)	−0.019 (0.04)
Partner	−0.248** (0.11)	−0.205** (0.09)	−0.178** (0.08)	−0.228** (0.08)	−0.224** (0.08)	−0.235*** (0.08)
Both	0.115 (0.15)	0.037 (0.17)	0.036 (0.16)	−0.028 (0.16)	−0.028 (0.16)	−0.023 (0.16)
Respondent controls		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Household income			Y	Y	Y	Y
Household characteristics				Y	Y	Y
Respondent job controls					Y	Y
Partner controls						Y
Observations	404,149	404,149	404,149	404,149	404,149	404,149
R-squared	0.135	0.263	0.311	0.313	0.313	0.314

Notes: All models include country-year fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at year and country level in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

magnitude of the partner penalty is comparable to the positive association with cohabitation (equal to about +0.2) and more than twice the negative association with being divorced or separated⁷ (equal to about −0.10).

Finally, when both the respondent and their partner are employed in tourism, no significant association with respondent's life satisfaction is found across all models. This result differs slightly from recent research on worked-linked couples by [Hennecke and Hetschko \(2025\)](#), who document a small positive correlation with life satisfaction among

couples who share similar occupations. Our results extend their study by showing that, in a context where a partner's job is negatively associated with individual well-being, occupational similarity does not imply a positive correlation per se but instead attenuates and offsets the negative association.

To address potential biases inherent in observational data, four complementary robustness strategies are applied (full results in the Web Appendix, Tables C.2 and C.3). First, the baseline OLS estimates are replicated on a restricted counterfactual set retaining only employed respondents and partners, ensuring that the partner penalty does not reflect compositional differences between employed and non-employed household members. Second, regional-year fixed effects are also incorporated as an alternative to country-year fixed effects (to control for time-invariant regional characteristics), with standard errors clustered simultaneously at the region, year, and occupation level. The partner penalty remains stable in both specifications. Moreover, the magnitude of the penalty is persistent across years, even when only considering a more recent subsample (2010–2022) of data.

⁷ We note that the partner penalty and divorce status are conceptually distinct constructs: the divorce estimate reflects a cross-sectional comparison between individuals who are divorced and those who are single or partnered (depending on the chosen reference category), while the partner penalty reflects variation in life satisfaction as a function of the partner's occupation. The comparison is intended solely to convey effect size, not to imply equivalence of the underlying mechanisms.

Third, to address the possibility that certain individual characteristics drive both the likelihood of having a partner employed in tourism and lower life satisfaction a Poisson regression model with endogenous treatment effects is estimated.⁸ This approach models the probability to be treated jointly with the outcome, allowing for correlation between their error terms. The estimated Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATT) of -0.18 closely aligns with the OLS estimates while statistical tests confirm significant correlation between treatment and outcome errors. The robustness of the partner penalty is also supported using the propensity score matching technique. With nearest-neighbour matching and a 0.1 caliper we estimate an ATT of approximately -0.11 (Web Appendix, Table C.2).

Fourth, to move beyond cross-sectional associations, a difference-in-differences approach is applied to an aggregated panel in which average national life satisfaction is regressed on the annual share of workers, partners, and dual-sector couples in tourism, with country and year fixed effects. A one basis point increase in the share of partners employed in the tourism sector is associated with a change in average national life satisfaction ranging from -0.68% to -1.02% (Web Appendix, Table C.3), consistent with the individual-level estimates. Taken together, these robustness checks indicate that the partner penalty is unlikely to be driven by selection bias or unobserved time-invariant country and regional characteristics.

The differing associations for respondents' and partners' employment highlight the complex dynamics through which tourism work relates to individual well-being within partnerships and, potentially, families. While lower life satisfaction among tourism workers is largely explained by socioeconomic factors (especially wage), the negative association with partner employment is more persistent and cannot be fully explained by standard controls.

For example, even after accounting for the partner's working hours in Model 6, longer hours alone do not fully explain the observed partner penalty. Although each additional hour worked per week by the partner is associated with a small decrease in respondent life satisfaction (-0.002 , $p < 0.05$), the negative association is not offset.

Interpretation is nevertheless limited by data constraints. The lack of detailed information on weekend and night shifts prevents a comprehensive assessment of how irregular schedules may reduce family time and, consequently, life satisfaction.

The next section extends the analysis by examining how a partner's employment in tourism is associated with life satisfaction across specific respondent subgroups, which allows to identify heterogeneous patterns and provide more nuanced insights across demographic profiles.

4.2. Segmentation results

To investigate potential heterogeneity in our results, we examined how the association between tourism employment and reported life satisfaction varies systematically across different respondent subgroups. This investigation is guided by prior research suggesting that work-family conflicts may be influenced by individual characteristics, particularly gender (Shockley et al., 2017), family status and household composition (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007).

We posit that the link between partner employment and respondent life satisfaction is likely moderated by two key factors: gender-based expectations – specifically social reproductive gender roles (Costa et al., 2017), with particular attention to caregiving responsibilities – and family-related constraints.

To systematically analyze these heterogeneous patterns, the sample is segmented into seven subgroups based on gender and household

composition. The analysis first distinguishes between male and female respondents to explore gender-specific associations. Couples are then analyzed by household structure, with particular attention to those with and without children, as well as those providing care for elderly parents. To capture the intersection of gender and family responsibilities, separate analyses are conducted for female and male respondents living with partners and children. Results are reported in Table 3.

The analysis of gender differences reveals distinct patterns. While own employment in tourism continues to be unassociated with lower life satisfaction for either gender, partner employment exhibits a marked gender asymmetry. Male respondents report lower life satisfaction when their partner works in tourism, as shown in Table 3, Model 2, whereas no such association is observed for female respondents (Model 1).

When family characteristics are considered (Models 3 and 4 in Table 3), another notable demographic pattern emerges. The partner penalty is statistically significant only among married couples with children. Specifically, only married respondents with at least one child report lower life satisfaction when their partner works in tourism. This finding suggests that family structure plays a crucial moderating role.

To further investigate the work-family conflict hypothesis, we examined households with substantial caregiving demands – specifically families with both children and elderly parents (aged 75 and over). We hypothesize that employment in tourism exacerbates the challenges of managing multiple caregiving responsibilities. Model 5 of Table 3 confirms this hypothesis, revealing a broader negative association with life satisfaction. In these households, both respondent and partner employment in tourism are associated with lower life satisfaction. Notably, this association persists even when both partners work in tourism, although the limited sample size warrants cautious interpretation.

These findings suggest that tourism jobs create additional challenges for families balancing various caregiving responsibilities, beyond those implied by traditional gender role expectations.

To better understand the channels through which this gender disparity arises, two supplementary analyses were conducted to test whether the partner penalty – and its concentration among male respondents – can be explained by national, cultural, or attitudinal factors (results in Web Appendix, Figs. C.1 – C.4).

First, we examine whether cross-national differences in labor market working conditions may explain the gender gap. Following Díaz-Carrión et al. (2020), European countries are grouped into three clusters according to their work environment quality. Estimating the partner penalty for male respondents within each cluster reveals no statistically significant heterogeneity across groups. The estimated coefficients remain close to the main estimate, and we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the partner penalty is equal across clusters (Web Appendix, Fig. C.1). This indicates that labor market conditions, as classified by Díaz-Carrión et al. (2020), cannot explain the concentration of the partner penalty among male respondents.

Second, we construct one egalitarian-altruistic latent variable from four European Social Survey attitudinal items, that respectively capture the degree to which respondents value equality, loyalty, understanding, and care for others. The latent variable is included both as an additional covariate and as an interaction term with the partner-in-tourism indicator. The latent construct itself is significantly associated with life satisfaction (coefficient = -0.09 ; $t = -5.29$), meaning that respondents with weaker egalitarian-altruistic orientations report lower life satisfaction on average. However, the interaction term between the construct and the partner penalty is not statistically significant (coefficient = 0.016 ; $t = 0.26$), indicating that the partner penalty does not significantly vary with individual values along this dimension (Web Appendix, Fig. C.2). To provide a comprehensive overview of the data, the frequency distribution of the egalitarian-altruistic latent construct is reported (Web Appendix, Fig. C.3).

Lastly, we test whether the gender gap in the partner penalty is homogeneous when different levels of partner's education (which usually

⁸ To model the probability of having a job in tourism or having a partner employed in tourism in year t , we included the share of tourism jobs in the previous year ($t - 1$) at the regional level as a proxy for the probability of being employed in tourism.

Table 3

Tourism employment association with life satisfaction, segmentation results.

Subsample	Female resp.	Male resp.	Married no child.	Married with child.	Married with child. and old parent	Female, married with child.	Male, married with child.
Model	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Dep. variable	<i>Satisfaction with life</i>						
	<i>Tourism job</i>						
Worker	−0.019 (0.05)	−0.015 (0.06)	−0.106 (0.09)	0.035 (0.06)	−0.585*** (0.22)	0.007 (0.06)	0.100 (0.13)
Partner	0.006 (0.09)	−0.322*** (0.12)	−0.196 (0.16)	−0.280*** (0.11)	−1.067* (0.60)	−0.024 (0.13)	−0.338* (0.18)
Both	−0.191 (0.29)	0.181 (0.15)	0.116 (0.32)	−0.184 (0.28)	−2.141*** (1.01)	−0.422 (0.40)	0.156 (0.24)
	<i>Estimates based on number of:</i>						
Workers	13,527	5615	3563	4005	142	2913	1090
Partners	1472	3617	1350	2597	43	816	1779
Both	473	425	231	435	17	245	190
Observations	215,903	188,245	98,569	105,626	3663	54,936	50,688
R-squared	0.317	0.313	0.327	0.309	0.361	0.302	0.323

Notes: All models include the full set of controls and country-year fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at year and country level in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

captures wage differentials) and household income deciles are considered. Results (reported in the Web Appendix, Fig. C.4) confirm that the gender gap is persistent and is not significantly influenced by household income or partner's education.

Taken together, neither structural labor market differences across countries nor individual attitudinal orientations – or household income and partner education – seem to explain the observed gender asymmetry in the partner penalty. Instead, the evidence points toward work-family conflict as the more likely explanatory mechanism, with household-level gender role dynamics appearing to moderate its strength.

4.3. Work-family conflict in tourism jobs

To explore the mechanisms underlying work-family conflict in the tourism industry, specialized rotating modules were leveraged from multiple rounds of the European Social Survey. These modules provide detailed insights into work, family and well-being (rounds 2 and 5), personal and social well-being (rounds 3 and 6), as well as digital social contacts in work and family life (round 10). General aspects of social life were also included, particularly the frequency of meeting friends and family (all rounds). The indicators allow us to examine whether individuals employed in tourism, or their partners, experience different levels of time-based, strain-based, or role-based work-family conflict compared to employees in other sectors within their countries.⁹

While some questions employed Likert scales with fewer than ten options (and should not be considered as continuous variables and investigated using OLS, but treated as categorical variables), we chose to present the findings in Table 4 using linear OLS models for clarity of interpretation. Nevertheless, the results are confirmed (in the Web Appendix, Fig. C.5) using ordered logit and probit models that are robust to the categorical assumption.

All coefficients reported in Table 4 incorporate country-year pair fixed effects to account for nation-specific temporal patterns, with standard errors clustered at the country level. Reported values can be interpreted as differences from the average national values for respondents working in tourism, or respondents whose partner is

employed in the industry, respectively.

Analysis of the coefficients in Table 4 reveals that tourism workers experience significantly higher levels of time-based work-family conflict compared to employees working in other sectors within their countries. Tourism employees report significantly more impediments to dedicate time to their family and partner (+0.10, on a 5-point Likert scale from 'never' to 'always') and are less satisfied with their work-life balance (−0.23, on an 11-point Likert scale from 'extremely dissatisfied' to 'extremely satisfied') while they engage more frequently in weekend work (+1, on a 5-point Likert scale from 'never' to 'every week') and short-notice overtime requirements (+0.46, on a 7-point Likert scale from 'never' to 'every day').¹⁰

Furthermore, respondents with tourism-employed partners report to socially meet with friends, relatives, or work colleagues less frequently compared to other respondents, including those employed in the tourism industry (−0.18, on a 7-point Likert scale from 'never' to 'every day'). Further evidence of time-based work-family conflict emerges from the analysis of the gap between respondents' desired and actual weekly working hours for their partners. Tourism employees express a desire for their partners to work an additional +2.2 h per week, while respondents with tourism-employed partners would prefer their partners to reduce their weekly working hours by −2.12 h. The desired working hours mismatch between partners indicates further potential time-based work-family conflict, consistent with the significant constraints on family time, unsocial working hours and unpredictable overtime work reported by tourism workers (compared to employees working in other sectors within their countries).

Finally, the examination of strain-based and role-based dimensions of work-family conflict revealed no significant differences. This suggests that time-based work-family conflict, rather than other forms of work-family tension, may be the primary mechanism through which partner tourism employment is associated with life satisfaction.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study provides compelling evidence that partner's employment in the tourism industry is associated with lower individual satisfaction with life. This can be explained by family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974), which views partners as interdependent and posits that work-

⁹ It is important to note that the following analysis relies on proxy indicators available in the European Social Survey specialized rotating modules and does not directly test these mechanisms. The results reported should therefore be interpreted as consistent with – rather than proof of – a specific type of work-family conflict.

¹⁰ Measurement details and full questions are available in the Web Appendix, Section B – Measurement items and response scales.

Table 4

Work-family conflict in tourism jobs, by type.

	Tourism job: worker (ϕ_1)	Tourism job: partner (ϕ_2)	Obs.	Years
Time-based				
Job prevents you from giving time to partner/family	0.10** (0.04)	0.08 (0.06)	58,619	2004–2005; 2010–2012; 2021–2022.
Satisfied with balance between time on job and other aspects	–0.23** (0.10)	–0.13 (0.18)	72,832	2006–2007; 2010–2013.
Working during the weekend	1.00*** (0.15)	0.10 (0.10)	44,736	2004–2005; 2010–2012.
Working overtime with short notice	0.46*** (0.08)	0.20*** (0.06)	44,385	2004–2005; 2010–2012.
How many hours a week would you like your partner to work (more or less) with respect to the actual worked hours? ^a	2.20** (0.80)	–2.12** (0.88)	14,997	2010–2012.
How often do you socially meet with friends, relatives, or colleagues	0.07 (0.06)	–0.18*** (0.03)	445,153	2002–2022.
Strain-based				
Partner/family fed up with pressure of your job, how often	0.04 (0.03)	–0.05 (0.10)	38,600	2010–2012; 2020–2022.
Find job stressful, how much of the time	0.15 (0.13)	–0.06 (0.17)	22,978	2006–2007.
Disagree that job requires to work very hard	–0.07 (0.05)	0.04 (0.08)	38,143	2004–2005; 2010–2012.
Role-based				
Obedience and respect for authority most important virtues children should learn	0.02 (0.04)	–0.12 (0.10)	34,595	2020–2022.
Women should be prepared to cut down on paid work for sake of family	–0.00 (0.03)	0.02 (0.01)	142,360	2004–2005; 2008–2012.
Important if choosing job: job allowed you to combine work/family	–0.03 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	80,675	2004–2005; 2010–2012.

Notes: This table shows the results of a set of linear OLS estimates ($y_{ict} = \alpha_{ct} + \phi_1 TJ \text{ respondent}_{ict} + \phi_2 TJ \text{ partner}_{ict} + \epsilon_{ict}$) for questions related to work-family conflict. α_{ct} are country-year fixed effects. Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by country. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. ^a Estimates computed using the difference between two questions of the European Social Survey: how many hours a week would you like your partner to work, and how many hours does your partner usually work. Analysis is limited to respondents with employed partners.

related stressors experienced by one partner can spill over and affect the well-being of the other partner. Hence, work-family dynamics related to tourism employment appear to play an important role in partners' life satisfaction.

This mechanism operates differently by gender. Male respondents report a lower life satisfaction when their partner is employed in tourism, the 'partner penalty', whereas female respondents do not exhibit this penalty. This finding highlights the role of gender as a moderating factor in work-family dynamics, potentially amplifying negative associations or, conversely, fostering certain aspects of employment in the tourism realm. When both partners are employed in tourism, the negative association with partner life satisfaction is absent, demonstrating that – unlike prior research showing that occupational similarity slightly improves life satisfaction (Hennecke & Hetschko, 2025) – the negative correlation is offset rather than reversed. This pattern is consistent with shared occupational understanding compensating the negative association, although this is not directly measured in the data and warrants further investigation.

When it comes to the type of work-family conflict, time as a resource to be conserved (Hobfoll, 1989) seems under pressure among partners of tourism employees, potentially compromising family time and social life. Based on analysis of specialized European Social Survey rotating modules, our findings suggest that time-based work-family conflict is significantly higher among tourism workers and their partners than in other sectors. Specifically, the revealed opposing preferences for weekly working hours between partners when one is employed in tourism, combined with the significantly below-average social interactions of tourism workers' partners, is consistent with the hypothesis of family time displacement. Hence, interventions need to focus on schedule-related tourism job characteristics rather than relying on generic work-life balance rhetoric. Simple increases in economic compensation to offset partners' lower life satisfaction are not a viable solution, as this would require raising household income by more than three deciles of

the national income distribution. Instead, mixed interventions combining monetary and non-monetary measures could be effective to address time-based work-family conflict.

At the organizational level, tourism employers need to place greater emphasis than other sectors on women and family-supportive practices that reduce time-based work-family interference, as well as on extending the benefits of tourism employment to employees' partners. Such practices may include: (1) fostering family-friendly workplace policies and environments, including initiatives that promote physical proximity to partners or families, such as on-site or affiliated childcare services; (2) extending employment-related benefits (e.g., discounts or gifts) to partners; (3) promoting long-term care insurance to support employees with dependent parents or children requiring long-term care; (4) facilitating access to childcare services, kindergartens, and after-school or weekend programs that accommodate the sector's specific distribution of working hours; and (5) providing targeted financial incentives or bonuses for women with family responsibilities. These practices could help create a more inclusive tourism employment system for workers and partners with specific caregiver needs according to the context (Ladkin et al., 2023), which in turn can reduce employee turnover and improve long-term business resilience.

At the policy level, labor market regulations could provide fiscal incentives to tourism firms, such as tax credits or mortgage-backed incentives, for promoting women and family-friendly policies aimed at reducing time-based work-family conflict. Simultaneously, regulations could increase minimum compensation and labor taxes for work performed outside standard hours in firms not implementing family-supportive policies. Additional tax revenues could be allocated to fund targeted childcare and family support programs for tourism workers, helping to reduce caregiver burdens for families with irregular work schedules.

Industry associations have an important facilitating role in the adoption of a minimum set of family-friendly practices across the

tourism industry by: (1) developing and promoting best-practice guidelines for family-friendly scheduling; (2) creating benchmarking tools that enable employers to assess their scheduling practices against industry standards; (3) commissioning longitudinal research to track which family-friendly scheduling interventions consistently increase employees' as well as partners' life satisfaction while improving employee retention and recruitment.

6. Limitations and future research directions

Notwithstanding the contributions of the current study, the secondary data presents limitations. First, the data are repeated cross-sectional rather than longitudinal panel data, which limits the ability to make causal claims. The robustness tests address several of these concerns. Specifically, we use endogenous treatment models and propensity score matching to ensure that the observed associations do not reflect selection effects, namely that individuals with certain characteristics may be more likely both to work in, or have partners employed in the tourism industry and to report different levels of life satisfaction.

In addition, we construct a panel using average national life satisfaction and the national share of individuals and partners employed in tourism, showing that the results are robust in both significance and magnitude when applying a difference-in-differences estimator.

Taken together, these results lend support to a causal interpretation of the results presented, although concerns about unmeasured confounders may remain. While controlling for such confounders at the regional level through the inclusion of time-varying regional fixed effects, we cannot rule them out at the individual level. Future research using longitudinal panel data with individual fixed effects would further strengthen causal inference.

Second, the European Social Survey does not collect life satisfaction data from partners within the same household, preventing direct analysis of reciprocal household and family dynamics.

Third, as our analysis of work-family conflict relies on proxy indicators from the European Social Survey rather than on directly tested measures, it is acknowledged that work-family conflict mechanisms are interpretive rather than empirically established pathways. Besides, detailed information about work schedules (specific shift patterns, predictability of regular work hours, weekend versus weekday distribution) is limited, impeding fine-grained analysis of the temporal aspects of tourism work that matter most for work-family conflict. Future research using a purpose-built longitudinal panel could directly test these mechanisms. Furthermore, other potential mechanisms linking tourism employment to partner life satisfaction — including partnership quality and the shared occupational understanding hypothesized to explain the absence of a partner penalty among dual-tourism couples — could not be directly tested and warrant investigation in further studies using dedicated dyadic instruments.

Besides, whether partners work in the same organization cannot be observed, limiting the ability to distinguish same-organization effects from same-sector effects when both partners work in tourism.

Furthermore, while controlling for education as a proxy for wages, individual-level wage data would enable more precise economic channel analysis.

Lastly, the occupational classifications, while following the ILO proposal, may include some heterogeneity within the tourism and hospitality category. For instance, managers may experience different work conditions than front-office service staff. However, the subsample size does not allow for a detailed within-sector analysis. Further empirical research with different data could address these challenges.

From a theoretical perspective, the relationship between time-based work-family conflict and life satisfaction in the tourism industry requires further investigation, particularly regarding the differing results for workers versus their partners. Additionally, there is a need to examine how gender dynamics moderate these relationships, including whether traditional gender roles, societal expectations, or other socio-cultural

factors influence the observed asymmetric effects (Figuerola-Domecq et al., 2015).

Finally, randomized controlled trials could explore how organizational practices and interventions can better support family and partner well-being, especially in dual-career families.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Davide Arioldi: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Eva Vroegop:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2026.100221>.

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