

Multi-speed adaptation in human wellbeing: Parenthood decouples subjective experience from physiology

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SUPSI - Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana

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Human wellbeing is often conceptualized as a unified construct, yet sustained life demands may affect subjective evaluations and biological functioning on different timescales. Using longitudinal data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study linked to biomarkers and DNA methylation, we examine whether the transition to parenthood generates coordinated or divergent patterns across these dimensions. Event-study and fixed-effects analyses show that new parents experience immediate and persistent declines in domain-specific subjective wellbeing—particularly leisure and income satisfaction—and an increase in self-reported poor health. In contrast, cross-sectional analyses of physiological measures indicate that parents exhibit more favourable profiles across immune, cardiovascular, and metabolic systems and, in several specifications, a modestly slower pace of biological ageing. These patterns follow a clear life-course gradient: subjective penalties are concentrated when children are young, whereas physiological differences emerge gradually and are most evident later in adulthood, especially at moderate parity. Falsification tests suggest that this divergence is not driven by socioeconomic strain, psychological distress, or reporting bias. Together, the findings point to a temporal decoupling of subjective and biological wellbeing under sustained caregiving demands.



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