





Effects of Paternal Unemployment on Family Dynamics and Well-Being: A Systematic Review

Nebi Sümer¹  | F. Umut Beşpınar²  | Anna Sieben^{3,4}  | Zeynep Beşpınar⁵  | Ladin Gürdal¹  | Öznur Uşaklılar²  | Zeynep Kapısız³  | Ezel Üsten⁴ 

¹Sabancı University, Istanbul, Turkey | ²Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey | ³Bergische Universität Wuppertal, Wuppertal, Germany | ⁴Forschungszentrum Jülich, Jülich, Germany | ⁵Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey

Correspondence: Nebi Sümer (nebi.sumer@sabanciuniv.edu)

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ABSTRACT

Hegemonic masculinity theory suggests that unemployment undermines fathers' social identity and well-being, given the association between masculinity, paid employment, and breadwinning. This systematic review of 74 studies published between 1980 and 2024 examined six domains on the effects of paternal unemployment: psychological and physical well-being, children's academic and cognitive outcomes, fertility, parental involvement and caregiving, gender roles, and cultural adaptation. Almost 40% of the studies used longitudinal designs, providing stronger evidence about how unemployment influences family dynamics over time. Findings indicate that masculinities, cultural context, and immigration status shape how unemployed fathers interpret and respond to job loss, affecting caregiving and family roles. The most marked adverse effects were on psychological well-being and parenting, particularly among immigrant fathers, although unemployment sometimes increased their involvement. We found that 90% of studies were conducted in the Global North, limiting generalizability and underscoring the need for research that addresses structural and social barriers in non-Western populations.

1 | Introduction

Traditionally, paid work and income earning have been central to normative constructions of masculinity and culturally valued manhood (Crompton 2006; Zuo 2004). In recent decades, however, neoliberal economic restructuring, rising labor-market precarity, and women's increased participation in paid work have transformed the relationship between breadwinning and masculinity (Bloome et al. 2019; Demantas and Myers 2015; Wilton and Schormans 2024). Men's growing exposure to insecure employment, fragmented work trajectories, and prolonged unemployment has weakened the material foundations of male privilege within both family life and society (Roy and Allen 2022). From the perspective of hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell 1987, 1995, 2005), the declining availability of stable employment destabilizes traditional masculine identities by loosening their anchoring in breadwinning. As a

result, masculinity becomes increasingly uncertain and contested. Comparisons with previous generations—particularly fathers whose identities were shaped by secure employment—underscore how hegemonic masculinity remains tied to labor regimes that have largely disappeared, producing enduring feelings of loss and insecurity (Connell 2005; Damaske 2020; McDowell 2011).

Critical masculinity approaches can offer a strong analytical framework for understanding why unemployment constitutes not merely an economic disruption for men, but a profound social, emotional, and relational rupture. At its core, this approach emphasizes that men's access to social resources, power, and recognition has historically been organized around paid work and breadwinning. Employment functions not only as a source of income but as a central mechanism through which culturally legitimate masculinity is produced and sustained. When

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unemployment disrupts this mechanism, its effects extend well beyond financial loss, reshaping men's identities, relationships, and family dynamics (Roy and Allen 2022). Against this backdrop, this review examines the effects of paternal unemployment across multiple interrelated domains.

Pinpointing the precise timing of these economic and cultural transformations is difficult, particularly across diverse national contexts. This systematic review, therefore, focuses on the period from the 1980s onward, a critical juncture marked by the rise of neoliberal economic policies, the contraction of state-led secure employment, and growing labor market precarity on a global scale (Kalleberg 2013). This period also coincides with the increasing engagement of critical masculinity studies with fatherhood, together giving rise to a distinct body of scholarship on unemployment and fatherhood (LaRossa 1988).

The 1980s introduced new challenges to masculinity, particularly for unemployed immigrant fathers. Research consistently documents higher rates of paternal unemployment among immigrant and minority groups than among natives, as well as intergenerational patterns of labor-market exclusion (De Anda and Bachmeier 2008; Drinkwater 2017; Maes et al. 2019; Uhlendorff and Zimmermann 2014). These dynamics have contributed to the emergence of transnational fatherhood, especially among unemployed and underemployed migrant men, reshaping the relationship between masculinity, work, and caregiving across borders (Parke and Cookston 2021). For this reason, immigration constitutes a critical analytical dimension of this review.

Our literature review identified six key domains affected by paternal unemployment: psychological well-being, fertility decisions, children's academic outcomes and cognitive development, parental involvement, masculinity and fatherhood identities, and engagement with welfare systems. Several of these domains, especially psychological and family consequences, are underscored by recent meta-analyses, highlighting their relevance (Judd et al. 2023; Picchio and Ubaldi 2024). Judd et al. (2023) show that paternal unemployment is strongly associated with negative childhood experiences, substantially increasing risks of sexual abuse, neglect, physical abuse, and child maltreatment. Picchio and Ubaldi's (2024) meta-analysis finds that unemployment has an overall negative effect on health, with the strongest and most consistent impacts observed in psychological domains, particularly under long-term unemployment and more severely for men than for women, lending support to the male breadwinner model. Long-term unemployment is also associated with elevated suicide risk, especially within the first 5 years following job loss (Milner et al. 2013). Despite these robust findings, existing meta-analyses primarily focus on health outcomes and family spillover effects, leaving the broader dynamics of paternal unemployment comparatively underexplored.

2 | Critical Masculinity Approaches to Paternal Employment

First, unemployment has profound consequences for men's psychological adjustment and physical and mental well-being. Because hegemonic masculinity privileges self-reliance, emotional restraint, and economic provision, job loss is often

experienced as a threat to identity and moral worth rather than as a structurally produced condition. Consistent with this perspective, research shows that unemployment tends to affect men more severely than women, reflecting the persistence of breadwinner identities. Paternal unemployment has been found to have more detrimental effects on fathers' and children's well-being than maternal unemployment, particularly in contexts where traditional male breadwinner norms remain strong (Hansen and Stutzer 2022; van der Meer 2014). Unemployment produces longer-lasting declines in men's life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Clark et al. 2008), with mental health deterioration more pronounced when the male rather than the female spouse becomes unemployed (Marcus 2013; Sümer et al. 2013). Critical masculinity approaches further highlight how unemployment may generate shame, anxiety, and feelings of personal failure among men, increasing vulnerability to depression, stress-related illness, and social withdrawal, especially where alternative masculinities are limited or stigmatized (Wilton and Schormans 2024). Because unemployment undermines men's socially expected provider role, psychological distress tends to be more severe for men than for women (Zuelke et al. 2018), and paternal unemployment has been identified as an antenatal risk factor for child maltreatment (Baldwin et al. 2020). More broadly, men's unemployment may constitute a biographical rupture associated with loss and post-traumatic symptomatology (Cottle 2001).

Second, unemployment shapes fertility decisions and reproductive trajectories by constraining men's capacity to fulfill the breadwinner role, which often conditions marriage, childbearing, and family formation. From a critical masculinity perspective (Connell 1995; Connell 2005), economic insecurity interacts with masculine expectations to delay or foreclose reproductive plans, thereby reinforcing classed and gendered inequalities in family formation, as men's capacity to marry and have children increasingly depends on stable employment and the ability to fulfill breadwinner expectations. Occupational uncertainty, such as difficulties entering the labor market or career interruptions, has been shown to postpone marriage and fertility decisions (Oppenheimer et al. 1997; Tölke and Diewald 2003), although evidence on the direct effects of long-term unemployment on the transition to fatherhood remains mixed (Goldscheider et al. 2010).

Third, fathers' unemployment has implications for children's academic outcomes and cognitive development. Beyond income loss, unemployment may undermine fathers' confidence and emotional availability, shaping parent-child interactions and the resources accessible to children. In contexts where hegemonic masculinity norms prevail, prolonged paternal unemployment can prompt adolescent sons to assume breadwinning roles, sometimes leading to school disengagement or dropout (Welmond and Gregory 2021). Boys who strongly embrace hegemonic masculinity ideals may also face academic difficulties, as these norms are often associated with disengagement from schooling and underachievement (Kimmel 2006).

Fourth, unemployment alters parental involvement in ambivalent ways. While job loss can increase men's time for care, masculine norms often limit their engagement or make caregiving psychologically fraught. A critical masculinity perspective

explains why some men move toward more caregiving-oriented fatherhood, while others withdraw, viewing care as a threat to masculine status. Despite the growing visibility of the involved father, men's increased participation has not led to an equal redistribution of domestic labor: fathers' involvement remains more play-centered, while mothers continue to shoulder routine care and household work (Chambers 2012). These shifts challenge the provider-carer divide but leave gendered asymmetries in caregiving expectations largely intact (Dermott 2008; Miller 2011). At the same time, some studies report mixed outcomes. For example, Hennecke and Pape (2020) show that fathers' job loss can reduce the gender care gap by increasing men's weekday involvement in childcare and housework.

Fifth, unemployment reshapes masculinity and fatherhood identities by destabilizing breadwinner norms central to paternal authority. Men respond in divergent ways, either renegotiating fatherhood through more gender-flexible, caregiving-oriented identities or reasserting traditional authority through control, withdrawal, or conflict. Low-income unemployed men are particularly vulnerable, as hegemonic and classed ideals of masculinity marginalize those who fail to meet dominant expectations (Kaufman 1999; Kimmel 2000). Despite this disruption, many men continue to sustain masculine identities within hegemonic frameworks (Willott and Griffin 1997).

Finally, unemployment shapes men's cultural adaptation and engagement with welfare systems, particularly among migrant fathers. Research shows pronounced disparities in paternal unemployment among immigrants (De Anda and Bachmeier 2008; Drinkwater 2017) and minority fathers (Yu and Sun 2019), which intensify the negative effects of job loss through acculturation stress. Unemployment and underemployment are particularly prevalent among second-generation immigrants, suggesting intergenerational patterns of disadvantage (Maes et al. 2019). Intensified global migration has contributed to the emergence of transnational fatherhood, most often experienced by unemployed or underemployed immigrant men, involving distinct configurations of masculinity, parenting, and caregiving (Parke and Cookston 2021). Welfare reliance may also conflict with masculine ideals of independence and provision, producing stigma and institutional mistrust (Walker and Roberts 2017).

These six domains within the contexts of sociocultural and economic as well as welfare state and immigration conditions, demonstrate that paternal unemployment affects families not only through income loss but by destabilizing the gendered foundations of power, recognition, and relational stability. Existing research shows that paternal unemployment shapes multiple domains, including fatherhood and masculine identities (K. M. Roy 2006), parenting practices (Latshaw and Hale 2015), marital relationships (Lam and Ambrey 2019), and child outcomes (Andersen 2013). Although systematic reviews and meta-analyses have examined the psychological consequences of parental unemployment (e.g., Judd et al. 2023; Moustერი et al. 2018), the specific dynamics of paternal unemployment have not yet been systematically reviewed.

Addressing this gap, the present study synthesizes evidence on the psychological, health, and social consequences of paternal unemployment across six domains: (a) psychological well-being

and health, (b) fertility and reproductive trajectories, (c) child academic and cognitive outcomes, (d) parental involvement and caregiving, (e) masculinity and gender roles, and (f) cultural adaptation, acculturation, and engagement with welfare systems. Using a systematic review design rather than a meta-analysis allows the inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative studies, as well as longitudinal panel data from diverse disciplines. While treated as a distinct domain, masculinity also operates as a cross-cutting axis shaping the other dimensions through its intersections with class, ethnicity, migration, and welfare regimes.

3 | Method

3.1 | Identifying Literature and Search Terms

Following the procedures for conducting a systematic literature review (Siddaway et al. 2019), we reviewed relevant studies covering a broad range of disciplines. We conducted a comprehensive search across multiple electronic databases, including PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, ERIC, PubMed, Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, as well as reference lists of previous meta-analyses and review articles on paternal unemployment. We systematically applied search filters and inclusion criteria to identify studies, as explained above, published between 1980 and April 2024, allowing for comprehensive coverage of the literature while maintaining a theoretically grounded and empirically coherent review period.

To ensure transparency and replicability, a systematic literature review aiming to synthesize the findings from the diverse disciplines was conducted following established procedures for such reviews (see T. M. Jensen 2024; Siddaway et al. 2019). A structured search strategy was developed using precise search strings and Boolean operators to capture studies at the intersection of unemployment and fatherhood. Because the review focuses on the effects of paternal unemployment, the search strategy incorporated multiple synonyms and related terms referring to both core concepts. Terms related to unemployment (e.g., unemployment, job loss, joblessness, job search, labor market flexibility, irregular employment) were combined with terms related to fatherhood (e.g., father, fathers, fatherhood, paternal, dad) using Boolean operators. Unemployment-related terms were connected with the operator OR, fatherhood-related terms were also connected with OR, and the two conceptual clusters were then combined using AND to identify studies addressing both domains simultaneously. To further refine the search and capture studies addressing analytical themes, these core search strings were additionally combined with thematic keywords such as parenting, paternal involvement, paternal engagement, fertility, masculinity, immigration, and welfare systems. The consistent application of these Boolean combinations across multiple databases enabled the systematic identification of studies addressing the relationship between unemployment and fatherhood across different thematic contexts. The search yielded many potentially relevant records, which were compiled and screened according to the inclusion criteria defined for the review.

To identify additional relevant studies, we also conducted a search of the reference lists from reviews closely related to the focus of this review (e.g., Judd et al. 2023; Picchio and

Ubaldi 2024). The literature search and screening procedures were conducted following established guidelines for systematic reviews (e.g., Siddaway et al. 2019) and were informed by the principles of the PRISMA framework. Before the screening process began, the authors agreed on a screening protocol and inclusion criteria to ensure consistency in study selection. In the first phase of elimination, the search results (titles and abstracts) were independently screened by two members of the author team. Disagreements at this stage were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Although a formal inter-rater reliability coefficient was not calculated, the use of independent screening combined with consensus discussions helped ensure consistency in the evaluation process. For the records for which the reviewers did not initially reach agreement regarding exclusion or full-text review, the authors collectively discussed the cases and made a final decision. Subsequently, two authors independently assessed the full texts and then jointly discussed their evaluations to reach agreement on the final inclusion or exclusion based on the following criteria.

3.2 | Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

We used several inclusion and exclusion criteria to determine eligibility. Studies were considered eligible if they met the following a priori inclusion criteria: (a) unemployment and fatherhood status were specified in the study, (b) a sample of unemployed fathers with children (from prenatal period to all ages) was used, (c) the effects of paternal unemployment on a specific dependent (outcome) variable were analyzed in a qualitative, quantitative, panel, or other sorts of empirical data, (d) the study was published in a peer-reviewed journal and written in English, German, or Turkish. We excluded studies published in book chapters, unreviewed project reports, working papers/reports, or unpublished theses/dissertations. We also excluded studies with samples using unemployment for other purposes, including “stay-at-home fathers” or individuals not working for unspecified reasons (e.g., voluntary job leave, early, temporary or full retirement, or other reasons of not working other than a specific period of “unemployment”). Finally, one study was excluded due to very low scientific quality, as it relied on an extremely small sample size ($N=3$), which limited the reliability and generalizability of the findings.

3.3 | Study Selection and Data Extraction

As seen in Figure 1, after the initial search of titles and abstracts across multiple sources, yielding 1862 hits, we agreed on the 280 studies identified as potentially relevant based on the abstract screening. Additionally, we identified 44 studies through the texts and the reference lists of previous meta-analyses and reviews. Of 324 articles, 182 were either duplicates or were evaluated as irrelevant by authors based on the inclusion criteria, leaving 112 unique articles. We screened the full texts of these 112 articles. Of these, 38 were further excluded for one or more of the following reasons: their samples included stay-at-home fathers or individuals not working for another reason but not operationally unemployed; unemployed fathers were not analyzed separately but were combined with mothers or other non-working categories; the results specific to the effects of paternal

unemployment were unclear; or a study had a very low scientific quality.

Using a structured table given in [Supporting Information](#), encompassing not only the main findings of the included studies but also the critical methodological aspects and implications of those findings. We extracted relevant information from the 74 studies in the review. Each study was independently processed by two authors who worked together using the agreed-upon guidelines and a sample schema created by the first three authors. The two authors then worked together to compare their assessments and reach a consensus on an entry for the final table. The double processing of each article and the subsequent comparison within the dyads served as a quality control. The final table was streamlined and edited to have a consistent structure and wording across the studies. As seen in Table S1, we included information on (a) the country of origin of the sample, (b) the brief aim of the study, (c) if the study had an immigration context (yes or no), (d) the domain of the observed effect, out of the six domains described above, (e) the main theoretical framework used, if mentioned in the study, (f) study design (e.g., cross-sectional, longitudinal), (g) the sample characteristics, (h) the main instruments/measures utilized, (i) the primary data analyses strategy, (j) the main findings of the study, (k) limitations of the study, and (l) policy suggestions if provided in the study.

4 | Results

Only two studies examining the effects of paternal unemployment were identified from 1980 to 1999; most were published after 2010, following the 2008 global economic crisis (see Table 1). The sharp increase in international migration in recent decades has been accompanied by heightened scholarly attention to unemployed immigrant fathers during the same period. Of the 74 studies reviewed, 17 explicitly examined the effects of paternal unemployment in the context of immigration or related factors.

Although over four million participants were included in the reviewed studies, a large proportion of these participants were from a few multi-country studies using registered archival data sets from Northern European countries. Given that qualitative studies often employ small sample sizes, the reviewed studies showed substantial variation in sample sizes, ranging from 10 (Bergnehr 2022) to 1,938,003 (Kreyenfeld and Andersson 2014). In total, the studies included 4,608,586 participants, with a large portion of this total sample drawn from a few multicultural population-based studies conducted in Northern Europe.

One of the critical strengths of the reviewed studies is their reliance on longitudinal designs ($N=29$) to examine the temporal ordering of parental unemployment and family-related outcomes. These studies largely documented the long-lasting adverse correlates of paternal unemployment in almost all domains. However, these studies were mainly conducted in the cultural context of the Global North. Almost 90% of the reviewed studies draw on Western samples (23 employed North American samples, 41 employed Western European samples, and 3 employed Australian

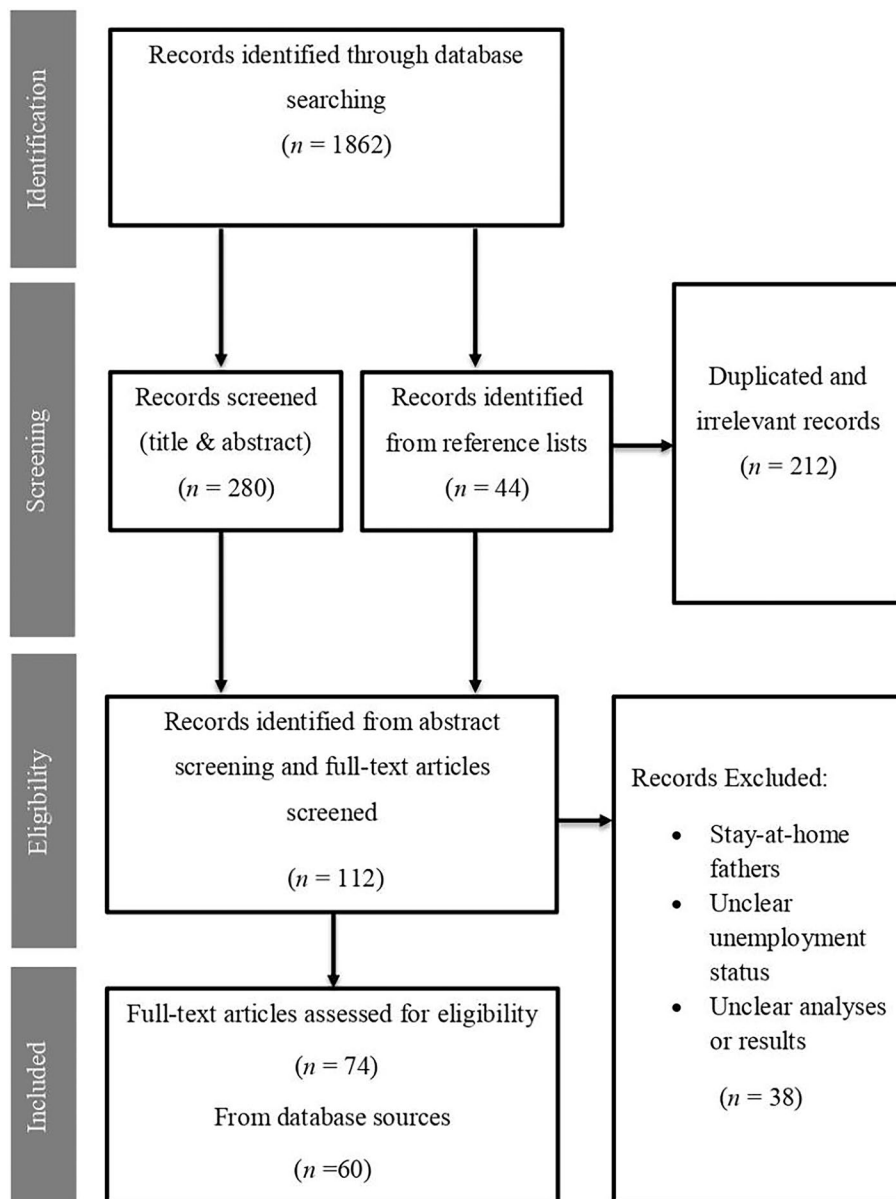


FIGURE 1 | Flow diagram of study selection.

samples), populations that together represent only about 12% of the world's population. Only a few studies have examined the effects of paternal unemployment in non-Western countries.

Research characteristics and main findings of the 74 studies are presented in Table S1. The summary findings on the effects of paternal unemployment across six thematic categories were presented in Table S1. Since many studies address multiple effects of paternal unemployment, these categories are not mutually exclusive. The first category, including 30 studies, focuses on the effects of paternal unemployment on psychological and physical well-being. This category also covers related subdomains, such as the maltreatment of children or other family members by unemployed fathers. The second category ($N=11$) refers to effects on fertility and reproductive success, including family structure and size. The third category ($N=16$) addresses the effects on children's or adolescents' academic outcomes and cognitive development. The fourth category ($N=20$) encompasses the effects on various aspects of paternal parenting dynamics,

including parental involvement and caregiving behaviors. The fifth category ($N=22$) specifically focuses on masculinity and fatherhood, manhood identities, and gender role-related issues. Finally, the sixth category ($N=8$) explores documented effects on cultural adaptation, acculturation, and engagement with welfare systems, primarily experienced by unemployed immigrant fathers. Of the reviewed studies, 17 (or 23%) incorporated an immigration context; however, due to the varied nature of their findings, we did not assign them to a specific category, as the impacts varied across domains.

5 | Discussion

5.1 | Psychological and Physical Well-Being

Since losing a job is one of the most stressful life events, most past studies have examined its adverse psychological effects on fathers, from overall well-being to mental health problems of

TABLE 1 | Overview of studies.

Study characteristic	Number of studies	Number of participants (N)
Year of publication		
1980–1999	2	695
2000–2009	18	491,476
2010–2019	34	2,173,603
2020–2024	20	1,942,812
Immigration context		
Yes	17	772,321
No	57	3,836,265
Study design		
Cross-sectional	17	116,742
Longitudinal including panel surveys	29	3,044,063
Qualitative	19	614
Archive	9	1,447,167
Country		
USA	20	123,128
UK	7	39,292
Germany	6	39,686
Sweden	4	977,494
Spain	4	18,611
Finland	4	309,802
Denmark	3	352,064
Portugal	3	2616
Canada	3	8484
Australia	3	24,345
Multi-cultural	6	2,515,070
Other	11	197,994
Study domain ^a		
Well-being effects	30	1,197,981
Offspring's development	16	597,383
Cultural adaptation/migration	8	1,116,076
Parental involvement	20	103,378
Gender identity	22	32,427
Fertility/family structure	11	2405.243
Total	74	4,608,586 ^b

^aStudies can have effects on multiple domains.

^bThe number of participants was calculated for 71 studies since *N* was unspecified in three studies (Huttunen and Riukula 2024; Kravdal 2002; Kristensen and Lappégård 2022) using nationwide demographic data.

the family members to relationship problems, including marital disputes, domestic violence, child maltreatment, and neglect. Consistent with the premises of the Family Stress Model (Masarik and Conger 2017), these studies documented that father unemployment negatively affects the mental and physical well-being of the unemployed father and his family members, as well as erodes the quality of interactions within the family unit. Father unemployment is typically the most detrimental type of parental job loss; its effects spill over to all family dynamics (Högberg and Baranowska-Rataj 2024).

From a hegemonic masculinity perspective, paternal unemployment functions as a gendered identity rupture, as the loss of breadwinning undermines culturally dominant expectations of male provision, authority, and control, thereby amplifying psychological distress and destabilizing family relations beyond its material consequences. In a large Spanish and Portuguese sample, Moreno-Maldonado et al. (2020) found that adolescents with unemployed fathers reported lower life satisfaction than their peers with both parents unemployed or only mothers unemployed. Although unemployed fathers tend to spend more time with their children (Sidebotham et al. 2002), the quality of father-child relationships often deteriorates (Lindemann and Gangl 2019), indicating the effect of parental unemployment on the family climate. Long-term paternal unemployment also negatively affects fathers' well-being, co-parenting efficacy, and family engagement (Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2010), even as their paternal caregiving responsibilities within the family tend to increase (Schindler and Coley 2007). Prolonged unemployment adds to heightened parenting stress (Nomaguchi and Johnson 2014), negative emotionality such as depression, sadness, and anxiety (Rao 2017), and even mortality risk (Mörk et al. 2020).

As expected, the adverse effects of unemployment spill over to other family members. Couple relationships, particularly those with children, are influenced by declining family life quality and familial well-being (Weckström 2012), often resulting in increased domestic violence (Christoffersen 2000). Bubonya et al. (2017) found that wives' mental health deteriorates considerably when their husbands experience prolonged unemployment. Rao (2017) noted that unemployed fathers often fail to engage in emotional support to alleviate their wives' worries about their situation.

Parental unemployment most acutely affects children. These negative impacts can even begin in the antenatal period. Baldwin et al. (2020) found that fathers who were unemployed during the antenatal period were later more likely to have children classified as *in need* due to abuse or neglect, compared to those who were employed. Many studies have examined how unemployment affects various aspects of children's adjustment and well-being. Sixteen studies demonstrated that father unemployment worsens children's mental health by harming their physical or psychological well-being (e.g., Hansen and Stutzer 2022), which can lead to maltreatment and neglect (Metzner et al. 2017) and may even trigger early puberty in girls (Arım et al. 2011). Högberg and Baranowska-Rataj (2024) found that paternal unemployment increases the risk of psychotropic drug use within 5 years of paternal unemployment. In families with unemployed fathers, boys were more frequently exposed to abuse than girls

(Christoffersen 2000). In a large Portuguese sample, Fernandes et al. (2013) found that children of unemployed fathers were worse off when their parents were of dual or foreign nationality than when their parents were of Portuguese nationality, suggesting an added difficulty stemming from the immigration context. Three studies have highlighted how paternal unemployment can influence a child's future orientation and expectations; children with unemployed fathers are generally more pessimistic about their futures (Lindemann and Gangl 2019), even experiencing lower job security in middle age (Lam and Ambrey 2019) and facing a significant risk of becoming unemployed themselves in the future (Stafford et al. 1980). These findings suggest a potential intergenerational effect of paternal unemployment.

A few studies yielded null findings, suggesting that father unemployment does not significantly impact child adjustment or maltreatment (Guterman et al. 2009; Lee et al. 2008; Mörk et al. 2020). Two studies documented age-specific or stage-sensitive positive effects of father unemployment. Nikolova and Nikolaev (2021) found that parental unemployment can enhance life satisfaction for boys aged five or younger, likely due to increased paternal involvement during that period. Powdthavee and Vernoit (2013) uncovered that short-term father unemployment could positively affect younger girls' psychological well-being in early adolescence. However, prolonged unemployment tends to have adverse effects regardless of a child's age and poses a significant risk of future unemployment (Stafford et al. 1980). Anderberg et al. (2016) showed that male and female unemployment have opposite-signed effects on domestic violence in England, indicating that female, but not male, unemployment increases the risk of abuse and domestic violence.

Three studies qualitatively explored fathers' experiences and negative feelings in the context of unemployment and its impact on the family environment. Although the findings of these studies were in line with the results of the quantitative studies, Frasquilho et al. (2016) presented mixed findings regarding the impact of unemployment on family relations, indicating that unemployed fathers highlighted both the negative influences, including increased conflict in both couple relationships and father-child relationships, and positive aspects such as social support and unity within the family system as a coping mechanism.

5.2 | Fertility and Reproductive Trajectories

Unemployment can influence parenthood from the start, in whether to become a parent and, if so, when and with how many children. The links between unemployment and birth rates at the aggregate level of societies are the subject of demographic research and not presented here (e.g., Karaman-Örsal and Goldstein 2018, analyze fertility and unemployment rates in OECD countries between 1957 and 2014). Relevant to our questions are sociological, psychological, or demographic studies that examine births and employment status at the individual level. Except for one paper presenting results from qualitative interviews, all papers use large-scale panel or register data containing employment and fertility information. In all the articles ($N=11$) reviewed in this domain, the starting point is the hypothesis that unemployment among women increases the probability of having a child, whereas the opposite is assumed

for men. This pattern is explained by different family roles and responsibilities. While motherhood can be an alternative to employment for women, paternity is linked to employment for many men, according to the breadwinner model (even in a weakened or implicit form; see Santero and Naldini 2020, in this review).

Evidence from country-specific studies underscores the gendered effects of unemployment on fertility transitions. In Denmark, Andersen and Özcan (2021) found that unemployment has a positive effect on motherhood transitions and a negative effect on fatherhood transitions. No significant effect of unemployment on second births was observed. Also, in Norway, the results were opposite for mothers and fathers (Kristensen and Lappégård 2022). Mothers' unemployment was positively associated with having a child, whereas it was negatively associated with having a child for fathers. The relative risk of having a child was 2% higher for unemployed mothers compared to employed mothers and 6% lower for unemployed fathers compared to employed fathers. In the UK, Inanc (2015) observed that unemployment led to earlier transitions into parenthood for both men and women. Unemployed men who cohabited and unemployed single women had a higher probability of becoming parents. Regardless of the male's employment status, couples with employed female spouses had a substantially lower probability of becoming parents.

Similar patterns were found in Germany and Denmark, but additional differences emerged related to the socioeconomic situation (Kreyenfeld and Andersson 2014). Male unemployment was associated with delaying first and second childbearing in both countries. The role of female unemployment is less consistent. Both male and female unemployment were positively correlated with the probability of a third birth, and the relationship between unemployment and fertility varied by socioeconomic status. Fertility tended to be lower during periods of unemployment among highly educated women and men, but not among their less educated counterparts. These findings align with an analysis from Finland (Miettinen and Jalovaara 2020), where the relationship between employment uncertainty and entry into parenthood is not uniform across populations, though unemployment status was associated with delaying parenthood for both men and women. This association was stronger among men than among women and was mediated by educational level. Although young, unemployed, and low-educated women entered parenthood early, the same was not true of their male counterparts. In the U.S. (Yu and Sun 2018), unemployment was not significantly associated with subsequent childbirth for either gender. However, when differentiating socioeconomic status, it became clear that more advantaged men and women postponed childbirth more when they became unemployed compared to their disadvantaged counterparts.

In France, Dupray and Pailhé (2017) compared children of immigrants and natives. Unemployment had indeed differential effects on fertility: For daughters of immigrants, unemployment or non-permanent employment had no significant impact on conception, while it had a negative impact on female natives. There is no difference between the sons of natives and immigrant parents regarding the effect of current unemployment on childbearing, which is negative for both. A lasting period of

unemployment or recurrent unemployment had a more negative impact on entry into fatherhood for children of immigrants from North Africa than for native men.

There was no significant gender difference or opposite-gender effect in the two reviewed studies. Although men's unemployment has a more pronounced negative effect on fertility, overall, unemployment in Norway had a negligible impact on fertility when individual-level effects were considered (Kravdal 2002). Comparing East and West Germany, Özcan et al. (2010) found no significant association between unemployment and fertility timing in any of the utilized models for men in both East and West Germany. However, being unemployed had a positive impact on fertility in East Germany. Unemployment duration was not linked with women's fertility timing. In the UK and Germany, Di Nallo and Lipps (2023) found that job loss had a longer-lasting effect on fertility decisions among women than among men. When compared to women, the effect of men's job loss on fertility was only significant in the year of job loss but showed a weaker cumulative impact over time.

5.3 | Academic Outcomes and Cognitive Development

The reviewed studies documented that paternal unemployment is associated with children's and adolescents' academic outcomes and cognitive development across diverse cultural contexts. It has been linked to poorer school performance and lower academic aspirations (Andersen 2013), reflected in reduced GPA (Kalil and Ziol-Guest 2008; Lehti et al. 2019; Powdthavee and Vernoit 2013), lower rates of academic progression through reduced enrollment and more limited access to college-preparatory tracks (Lehti et al. 2019; Lindemann and Gangl 2019; Mari et al. 2024), lower overall educational attainment (Lam and Ambrey 2019), and lower levels of cognitive development (González et al. 2020). Beyond academic metrics, paternal unemployment has long-term effects on children's and adolescents' views of work. Paternal unemployment is associated with altered perceptions of work ethics, reduced labor-market expectations, and a search for more stable opportunities with lower earnings (Cinamon 2001; Huttunen and Riukula 2024; Mooi-Reci et al. 2019; Stafford et al. 1980). These findings have potential implications for how prolonged paternal unemployment may influence work values and ethics.

Socioeconomic disadvantages further deepen these impacts. Children from disadvantaged families experience more severe consequences (Fernandes et al. 2013; Mari et al. 2024), especially when unemployment benefits are insufficient (Mooi-Reci et al. 2019). The adverse outcomes are driven not only by income loss but also by disruptions to intra-familial well-being (Andersen 2013) and declining academic optimism (Lindemann and Gangl 2019). Findings also highlight time-specific effects, with the duration and timing of paternal unemployment (e.g., early school years) and the specific phase of unemployment the child is experiencing (e.g., the first year of unemployment) negatively influencing children's academic achievement (Andersen 2013; González et al. 2020; S. S. Jensen 2023). The child's age and gender moderate the impact of paternal unemployment. While younger children experience some

psychological benefits, older children, especially daughters, tend to be more vulnerable to adverse academic and emotional outcomes (Powdthavee and Vernoit 2013).

Contrasting findings also exist. Huttunen and Riukula (2024) demonstrated that children's schooling choices were influenced by their fathers' unemployment status. Those with unemployed fathers tended to choose educational domains that can guarantee welfare benefits and secure public sector employment, such as the health sector. In contrast, Mörk et al. (2020) found no direct effects of paternal unemployment on children's educational or labor market outcomes. The findings indicate that unemployed parents may prioritize job security for their children, even if these positions offer lower status or pay.

5.4 | Parental Involvement and Caregiving

Research on father involvement during unemployment reveals diverse findings, illustrating shifts in caregiving roles, domestic responsibilities, and gender role ideologies. These studies suggest that paternal engagement during unemployment is shaped by a complex interplay of socioeconomic status, cultural norms and expectations, and individual circumstances, reflecting the multifaceted nature of fatherhood. Unemployment often forces fathers to assume greater caregiving responsibilities, though a range of social and contextual challenges shapes this transition. Castrillo et al. (2020) found that unemployed fathers in Spain increasingly integrated childcare into their identities, particularly after involuntary job loss. Hennecke and Pape (2020) observed that unemployed fathers dedicated additional time to childcare and housework on weekdays, particularly when their partners were employed. However, as implicated in hegemonic masculinity theory, traditional gender roles frequently re-emerge during evenings and weekends (Latshaw and Hale 2015). Radin and Harold-Goldsmith (1989) noted that unemployed fathers with flexible gender-role beliefs and working partners were more likely to engage in childcare.

Chesley and Flood's (2017) analysis of the American Time Use Survey showed that the division of housework remains highly gendered, with at-home mothers doing more than at-home unemployed fathers. However, unemployed fathers spent significantly more time on their children's physical care and educational activities than employed mothers. Although their study's cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations and excludes variables such as outsourcing and spouses' working hours, it emphasizes the need for policies that promote gender equality in caregiving and housework. Shirani et al. (2012) noted that unemployment often triggers role reversals, challenging traditional masculinity and complicating fathers' transitions to caregiving roles.

K. M. Roy (2004) underscored the significance of job stability in shaping paternal involvement. Fathers with steady employment could provide financial support but faced time constraints that limited their direct engagement with their children. In contrast, fathers with unstable jobs or those who were incarcerated struggled to maintain consistent contact with their children. Weckström (2012), in a quantitative study in Finland, observed that although financial strain because of unemployment did not

significantly affect father-child relationships, it had a more detrimental impact on spousal relationships.

Emerging migration context further complicates fatherhood and father-child relationships by introducing both structural and cultural challenges alongside intensified caregiving, as we discuss below. Bergnehr (2022) documented that Middle Eastern refugee fathers in Sweden developed *reversed caring emerging masculinities*, emphasizing caregiving and intimacy despite economic hardship. Roer-Strier et al. (2005) and Este and Tachble (2009) found that immigrant fathers in Canada adopted expanded parenting roles due to unemployment and cultural adjustments while confronting systemic barriers like racism and language challenges. Shimoni et al. (2003) revealed that immigrant fathers from China and Hong Kong, hindered by unemployment, faced difficulties fulfilling paternal responsibilities, while Roy et al. (2010) noted that young fathers with past convictions struggled with employment but benefited from stronger relationships with their own fathers, underscoring the role of social and familial support in redefining fatherhood.

Unemployment imposes financial strain that significantly affects fathers' mental health, parenting practices, and broader family dynamics. Various theoretical models and empirical studies underscore how paternal unemployment-related economic hardship and familial stress influence parental involvement. Bronte-Tinkew et al. (2010) found that unemployment, coupled with parenting stress, negatively affected fathers' engagement and co-parenting, particularly in economically disadvantaged households. Building on these insights, Frasquilho et al. (2016) found that financial deprivation associated with unemployment intensified fathers' psychological stress and strained marital and filial relationships, spilling over parental involvement. As a potential intergenerational effect, the inability to meet children's basic needs and educational expenses seems to further undermine the family's overall well-being and stability.

Nomaguchi and Johnson (2014) expanded this perspective with a U.S.-based quantitative study guided by the Role Strain Theory, noting that unemployment increased parenting stress for both fathers and mothers in low-income, working-class families, with workplace inflexibility placing an additional burden on fathers. These studies highlight how economic pressures not only strain father-child relationships but also disrupt broader family interactions, emphasizing the critical role of financial stressors in shaping parenting experiences and involvement. This body of research highlights how unemployment reshapes fatherhood, pushing fathers toward greater caregiving involvement while exposing them to structural and cultural challenges. These findings underscore the importance of addressing systemic barriers and providing institutional support to promote equitable caregiving responsibilities and support families navigating economic hardship.

5.5 | Masculinity, Fatherhood, and Gender Roles

Unemployment profoundly reshapes family relationships, often redefining spousal and parent-child dynamics as fathers

assume new roles, identities, and responsibilities within the family. These shifts reveal the complex interplay among economic stress, constructions of fatherhood or manhood identity, and evolving family roles. Despite the shifts in parenting roles, adjustments to household responsibilities remain uneven. Solaz (2005) identified persistent gendered divisions of labor, with lower-educated and long-term unemployed fathers contributing less to caregiving and expressing ambivalence in their roles. Nonetheless, institutional support mechanisms, such as paternity leave, have been shown to encourage paternal engagement. Meil et al. (2023) reported that extended paternity leave in Spain increased fathers' involvement in childcare, though unemployed fathers were less engaged in housework and long-term caregiving. In a study of the Basque region, Legarreta-Iza and Sagastizabal Emilio-Yus (2023) categorized unemployed fathers into three types—caregivers, helpers, or breadwinners—concluding that prolonged unemployment strengthened fathers' identification with caregiving roles.

K. M. Roy (2006), adopting a Life Course Theoretical Approach in a U.S.-based qualitative study, explored how low-income unemployed fathers reflected on their own paternal figures. Fathers' perspectives, shaped by themes of stability, liminality, and inquiry, illustrated an ongoing reconstruction of paternal identity amid unemployment. Extending these insights, Lane (2009) employed ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and in-depth interviews, to examine shifting career models and gender norms among middle-class U.S. workers. Lane's findings revealed how unemployment reconfigures conceptions of fatherhood and family roles, reflecting broader societal changes. These studies demonstrate that unemployment compels fathers to renegotiate their roles within the family, affecting spousal and parent-child interactions while also reshaping cultural notions of fatherhood and masculinity.

Cultural and socioeconomic contexts profoundly shape how fathers navigate unemployment, influencing both their caregiving roles and broader family dynamics. These contexts often shape whether traditional gender roles are upheld or renegotiated. Sikweyiya et al. (2017), in a qualitative study of fathers in informal settlements in South Africa, found that precarious work conditions, cultural norms, and maternal gatekeeping restricted fathers' emotional and caregiving involvement. Despite these obstacles, the role of financial provider remained integral to their paternal identity. Este and Tachble (2009) examined Sudanese refugee fathers in Canada, highlighting how unemployment and social isolation disrupted traditional fatherhood roles. These fathers prioritized cultural transmission—teaching traditions and citizenship—while striving to preserve their cultural identity under challenging circumstances.

These studies illustrate how unemployment intersects with cultural and socioeconomic factors, shaping fathers' capacity to adapt their roles. Although economic provision often remains central to paternal identity, the added layers of cultural preservation and social barriers reveal the multifaceted realities fathers face in different contexts. Unemployment challenges the traditional breadwinner identity, typically assigned to fathers, leading to the redefinition of fatherhood. This shift often pushes fathers into expanded caregiving roles, aligning with evolving socio-cultural norms. Yet the degree of this transition depends

on factors such as cultural expectations, education levels, and economic conditions. Some fathers embrace caregiving as a new norm, while others grapple with role ambiguity, stress, and identity crises—particularly during prolonged unemployment. Future research should further explore how cultural frameworks and socioeconomic challenges intersect to shape paternal experiences.

Some studies show that unemployment indeed negatively affects the transition to fatherhood but not to motherhood. These results are contrasted by studies that do not confirm this gender difference or even show the opposite. Differential effects on migration background, socioeconomic background, and education level were found. The studies included in this review were conducted mainly in Global North cultural contexts, posing a limitation on generalizability, as the effects may differ in societies where unemployment is accompanied by more extreme forms of poverty and structural disadvantage.

5.6 | Adaptation, Acculturation, and Welfare Systems

Unemployed fathers, especially if they are immigrants, often struggle to navigate welfare systems that offer limited resources, which exacerbates the psychological strain and makes it more difficult for them to reintegrate into the workforce. Within the immigration context, unemployed fathers face additional stressors such as language barriers, cultural differences, and social isolation, complicating their access to welfare and job opportunities (Drinkwater 2017). For instance, Dupray and Pailhé (2017) found that extended periods of unemployment negatively impacted entry into fatherhood for children of immigrants from North Africa compared to native men in France. Rooth and Ekberg (2003) showed that people with both parents having a Southern or non-European background had a much higher probability of being unemployed in the Swedish labor market and low earnings, as compared to second-generation immigrants with at least one native parent. Unemployment and language problems are the main barriers for immigrant fathers, challenging the fathers who adopted traditional gender roles of fathers as the breadwinner and head of the family (Roer-Strier et al. 2005). The main challenges to successful integration faced by immigrant unemployed fathers are mostly linked with acculturation stress, including the loss of cultural background, lack of social support, racism, and difficulty in guiding their children within the new cultural context (e.g., Este and Tachble 2009).

The reviewed literature also shows that immigration and the adaptation process of unemployed fathers provide opportunities alongside these challenges. Despite the challenges, the literature shows that immigration allows fathers to redefine and adapt their traditional roles to new cultural norms. Rather than disengaging, fathers from diverse backgrounds remain actively involved with their children through adaptation, embracing new ways of parenting (Roer-Strier et al. 2005). K. M. Roy (2004) found that adaptive capacities and role flexibility were crucial determinants of redefining provider role expectations among African American unemployed fathers, leading to finding alternate ways to connect with children (e.g., “getting real” with children about past failures as providers). In the Canadian context,

where the state provides opportunities, support, and time for unemployed parents, Shimoni et al. (2003) found that Chinese fathers demonstrated a strong determination to learn the host culture’s language to help facilitate and support their children’s adaptation. The work of Strier (2014) highlighted that unemployed immigrant or minority fathers who have strong bonds with their cultural identities and religious beliefs are mostly resilient to the adverse effects of unemployment on their masculine identities.

The effects of father unemployment and immigration on paternal identity and the family are shaped by a combination of their culture of origin and the host country’s cultural characteristics, including its welfare system. For instance, while welfare benefits help mitigate the adverse effects of unemployment on children’s well-being, the impact of father unemployment is more pronounced in environments with stricter social work norms. The adverse effects of paternal unemployment are lessened in countries with higher female labor force participation, highlighting the roles of both welfare systems and gender norms in shaping the outcomes of parental unemployment (Hansen and Stutzer 2022). The migration path shapes how immigrant parents approach employment and unemployment. For instance, Santero and Naldini (2020) found that the female breadwinner model typically occurs when the mother arrives in the destination country before or independently from the father and has the necessary legal status to work in the host country.

Despite these shifts, immigrant fathers tend to view European parents as more gender-equal, even when the gender roles in their own family are changing. Unemployed immigrant fathers in specific European contexts seem to adopt more egalitarian gender roles. For instance, Bergnehr (2022) showed that Middle Eastern unemployed fathers shared daily chores and childcare more equally with their spouses when they resettled in Sweden than in their home countries. Mörk et al. (2020) demonstrated that, in the Nordic context, where unemployed immigrant fathers are entitled to extensive social welfare benefits, father unemployment was not associated with children’s education, health, and well-being. Reviewed studies suggest that family policies, cultural norms, and the services provided by the welfare state play a crucial role in shaping the family’s adaptation process and influence the impact of parental employment on child outcomes.

5.7 | Synthesizing the Effects of Paternal Unemployment

Interpreting the effects of paternal unemployment requires considering sociocultural contexts, welfare-state conditions, and the interaction among six key domains. As illustrated in Figure 2, the potential spillover effects of paternal unemployment unfold within broader structural contexts. These contexts are shaped by the welfare state and socio-cultural and economic dynamics. If the jobless father has a migration background, his experience may also be shaped by factors such as labor-market integration, discrimination, and transnational family expectations. Within this framework, paternal unemployment affects six identified domains, which interact with one another. For example, paternal unemployment often triggers a renegotiation of masculine

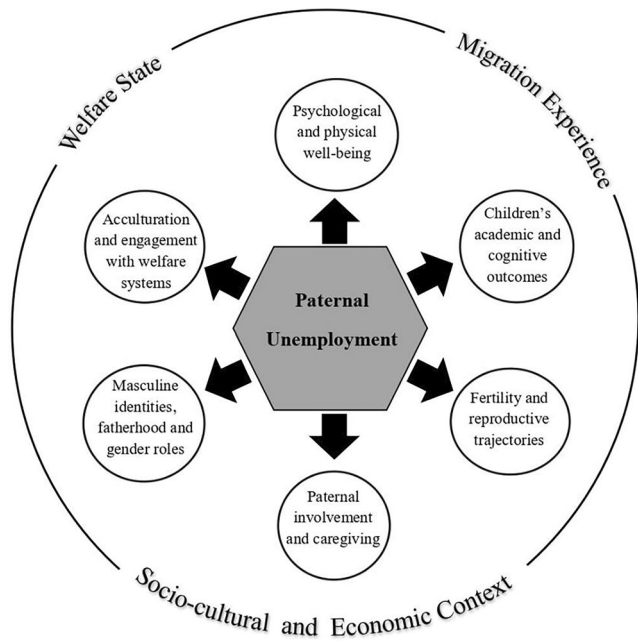


FIGURE 2 | Conceptual framework of paternal unemployment, masculinity, and family dynamics.

identity and gender roles. The loss of employment challenges the cultural link between masculinity and breadwinning. This can lead fathers to reinterpret their identities and positions within the family.

These processes influence both couple dynamics and fathers' well-being. We examined couple dynamics through two dimensions: fertility trajectories and couple relations. Partners' expectations regarding masculinity and gender roles influence how they interpret and respond to unemployment. When partners share similar views on these roles, they may experience fewer negative effects. Conversely, in contexts where breadwinning is closely linked to masculine identity, paternal unemployment can increase the risk to fathers' emotional well-being.

Jobless fathers' well-being is closely related to their level of involvement in childcare and family life. Fathers who maintain psychological well-being during unemployment are more likely to remain engaged in their children's daily lives, which supports children's academic and cognitive development. However, the impact of paternal involvement may vary depending on the child's age and gender. These factors also shape how unemployment affects family dynamics and child outcomes. Strong welfare state support, targeted programs for migrant families, and gender-egalitarian cultural norms can help mitigate the negative effects of paternal unemployment by providing families with institutional and social resources during periods of economic insecurity.

Reviewed studies show that the impact of paternal unemployment depends on socioeconomic context, unemployment duration, and family dynamics. Addressing long-term effects requires more than temporary financial aid. Research indicates that effective policies should address structural and social factors, such as equitable access to education, mental health services, and caregiving opportunities. Policymakers should

prioritize support for vulnerable groups, including migrants and low-income families, by promoting sustainable employment and educational opportunities to ensure long-term stability.

5.8 | Theoretical Perspectives

Of the 74 studies reviewed, 25 did not specify a theoretical model to base their expectations or explain their findings. These studies were mostly panel surveys using large databases. The remaining studies (66%) based their expectations/hypotheses on a theoretical or conceptual framework, though some did not specifically discuss whether their findings confirm or disconfirm the proposed theory or model. Connell's (1995, 2005) Hegemonic Masculinity Theory was directly used as a general framework in four studies. However, nine studies also used approaches closer to the Connell model, such as gender role theory, the masculinity approach, the gender-gap model, and sex-role ideology. Some of the studies utilizing an eclectic approach also benefited from the hegemonic masculinity perspective. However, studies employing eclectic or multiple perspectives did not elaborate on whether any of the approaches have a specific advantage in explaining the observed effect. Most reviewed studies on father unemployment do not directly refer to the critical masculinity approach, as they did not operationalize fatherhood in the context of masculinity or consider power and privilege issues within fatherhood (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; K. Roy 2026).

Role Strain Theory, the Family Stress Model, the Deficit Model of Fathering, and the Life Course Approach were also used in several studies. Hegemonic Masculinity Theory, along with the different versions of Gender Role Theory and the Family Stress Model, emerged as the most commonly used frameworks for explaining the various effects of paternal unemployment.

We used Hegemonic Masculinity Theory as the primary framework for this review. However, as discussed by Roy and Allen (2022), when using such approaches, masculinities should be considered as "systemic family-level processes" (pp. 30–31) rather than merely as individual traits or beliefs, to better understand the effects of paternal unemployment on the family system. Other theoretical approaches, cited in Table S1, can also inform understanding of the effects of paternal unemployment. Particularly, the Family Stress Model (FSM) (see Masarik and Conger 2017, for a review) offers a valuable framework for examining paternal unemployment as a critical economic hardship and its potential impact on jobless fathers and their families. When unemployment affects men, the crisis is mediated by dominant gender norms that position paid work and breadwinning as central to masculine identity. Job loss represents not only an economic disruption but also a symbolic and moral rupture, influencing how the crisis is perceived by men and other family members. From the perspective of hegemonic masculinity, men's unemployment challenges culturally institutionalized expectations of provision, authority, and self-worth, and thus intensifies the subjective and relational dimensions of family stress (Connell 1995; Kimmel 2000).

While the FSM explains how families respond to unemployment as a stressor, feminist and critical approaches highlight that stress appraisal and coping are fundamentally shaped by

gendered power relations. Scoping reviews show that, despite the rapid expansion of research on partners' stress and coping, the field remains dominated by Western-developed, identity-blind theories that marginalize gendered and intersectional experiences (Maitoza 2019; Randall et al. 2023). Feminist extensions of FSM contend that stress processes are not gender-neutral: normative masculinity regimes influence how unemployment is defined as a crisis, which coping strategies are considered legitimate, and how the consequences of stress are distributed within families. From this perspective, social context, particularly hegemonic masculinity and gender regimes, constitutes both stress appraisal and stress management, emphasizing the necessity of explicitly integrating gender into analyses of paternal unemployment-related family stress.

5.9 | Limitations

The current review was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles. This decision was made to ensure a consistent level of scientific quality and methodological rigor across the studies included in the review. As a result, other types of publications, such as dissertations, theses, book chapters, and reports, were not included. While this criterion helps maintain comparability and quality standards among the reviewed studies, it may also mean that some relevant findings published outside peer-reviewed journals were not captured in the present review. The file drawer problem refers to the tendency for studies with non-significant findings to remain unpublished, which may lead to an overestimation of effects in the published literature (Lishner 2022). In the context of this review, this limitation implies that studies identifying no psychological effects of paternal unemployment may not have been captured.

On the positive note, the review is certainly capable of yielding contradictory findings. Numerous studies have been published in this field of research that show an effect that runs counter to expectations. These are the studies described above that address the positive effects of unemployment. Nevertheless, we recommend further studies that also include the so-called file drawer.

6 | Conclusion

This systematic review conceptualized paternal unemployment as a gendered and relational condition rather than a solely economic event from the hegemonic masculinities approach. It offers family-focused practitioners a framework for interpreting men's psychological distress, parenting practices, and family dynamics during job loss. The findings also inform policymakers by highlighting the need for gender-sensitive employment and family policies. By identifying key mechanisms and contextual factors, the review supports the design of more targeted, evidence-based interventions.

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Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Table S1:** Characteristics of included studies.