

Impact of the timing, type and severity of disability on the subjective well-being of individuals with disabilities

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Abstract

Despite the existence of a large volume of literature on subjective well-being (SWB) of the general population, very few studies have focused on individuals with disabilities. The present study uses data on 24,036 Canadians with disabilities to investigate factors affecting their SWB. It found that SWB, measured here by level of happiness, decreases with severity of disability but is independent of the type of physical disability. Those born with a disability are likely to be happier as compared to those disabled later on in life. Per capita family income has no effect on happiness. However, unemployment decreases happiness. Happiness is found to be U shaped in age, bottoming out around 40 years of age. Some of these results vary when the sample is split according to the timing, type or severity of disability.

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Introduction and literature review

Subjective well-being (SWB) defined as either life satisfaction or happiness has been studied in considerable detail by psychologists and to some extent by sociologists and political scientists.¹ However, until recently economists have been reluctant to do so. The reason for this neglect is the subjective nature of the variable, a variable that measures ‘what people say’ rather than ‘what people do’. It is true that self-reported well-being has potential shortcomings such as response bias, memory bias and defensiveness. However, subjective data have proved to be stable and useful. It has been shown by Diener, Suh, Lucas, and Smith

(1999) that the stable component of satisfaction dominates the mood effects. Senik (2005) surveys empirical literature on SWB and illustrates the role that subjective data could play in investigating utility and social interactions that are beyond the scope of the method of revealed preference, and to guide economic policy in the light of citizens’ preferences. Diener and Suh (1997) discuss how measures of SWB, economic indices and social indicators can complement each other in assessing quality of life. An extensive overview of the field of SWB and its economic significance can be found in Frey and Stutzer (2002a, b).

SWB and the general population

One of the earlier well-known studies in the field of SWB is Wilson (1967) which, among other things, concludes that being young, healthy, well-educated,

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¹The terms happiness and SWB will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

well-paid, religious, married with high self-esteem and modest aspirations are prerequisites to happiness. In the decades that followed, a number of new studies emerged.

Regarding age, earlier studies including Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976), Herzog and Rodgers (1981) and Larson (1978) find that it does not have a negative effect on life satisfaction. On the other hand, Doyle and Forehand (1984), Robinson and Shaver (1973), and Stacey and Gatz (1991) reach the opposite conclusion. A shortcoming of most of these earlier studies is that they are based on small samples. Inglehart (1990) uses data on 16 countries from the Euro-Barometer Survey and the World Values Survey. His general conclusion is that the percentage of individuals who report being “very happy” is relatively constant across all cohorts. However, he finds some country-specific differences. The relationship between SWB and age is found to be negative in countries including France and Japan. The opposite holds true for some countries such as Britain and Ireland. For countries including Canada and Netherlands, there is a dip in midlife. Lastly, for some nations he finds no relationship (e.g., United States and Greece). Most of the recent studies, based on large national samples, find SWB to be U shaped in age (e.g., Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004, for Britain and US; Clark & Oswald, 1994, for Britain; Frey & Stutzer, 2000b, c, for Switzerland; Frey & Stutzer, 2000c, Gerlach & Stephan, 1996, for Germany; Gerdtham & Johannesson, 2001, for Sweden; Theodossiou, 1998, for Britain). However, Winkelmann and Winkelmann (1998) find the relationship to be negative for Germany.

Another variable that is of interest is income. Other than Clark and Oswald (1994), who find no relationship between income and happiness, all the aforementioned studies based on large national samples find income to have a positive effect on happiness, though the effect is small. Such a relationship has also been found by Diener, Sandvik, Seidlitz, and Diener (1993) and Haring, Stock, and Okun (1984). Diener, Horwitz, and Emmons (1985) compare extremely wealthy individuals, with a net worth of over 125 million US dollars, to randomly selected controls from the same geographical areas. They find the effects of income on SWB to be rather small.

A variable related to income is unemployment. Unemployment has been found to have a negative effect on SWB (e.g., Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004;

Winkelmann & Winkelmann, 1998). This result holds even when income is controlled for. Winkelmann and Winkelmann (1998) go a step further and study the impact of unemployment duration. They find that for those who are unemployed, satisfaction is unrelated to unemployment duration. Thus, they conclude that there is no evidence that the long-term unemployed get used to their situation.

SWB has also been found to vary by ethnicity. Most of the psychological and sociological studies comparing blacks and whites in US have found blacks to be less happy than whites (e.g., Campbell et al., 1976). Such a result has also been found for South Africa by Moller (1989). The results of the study show that the happiest people are whites followed by Indians, coloureds, and blacks. Economists have also found blacks in the US to have lower levels of happiness (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004). Frey and Stutzer (2000a, b) report foreigners in Switzerland being less happy.

Wilson's (1967) result regarding marriage has been replicated by a large number of studies (e.g., Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Glenn & Weaver, 1979, 1988; Gove, Style, & Hughes, 1990; White, 1992). The causal relationship between marriage and SWB has also been tested but the conclusion remains that the selection effect is not strong and that the positive relationship between marriage and SWB is mainly due to the beneficial effects of marriage (Mastekaasa, 1995).

Religious behaviour, whether measured as church attendance, religious certainty or prayer experiences has been found to be positively related to SWB (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Ellison, 1991; Gartner, Larson, & Allen, 1991; Poloma & Pendleton, 1991). The general view is that church attendance is a source of social support. Moreover, it is said that individuals who are religious can better cope with adverse circumstances by attributing it to the will of God (e.g., Frey & Stutzer, 2002a).

Gender differences in SWB have largely not been found. If differences are observed, women report being happier, though, this conclusion does not hold when other variables are controlled for (e.g., Inglehart, 1990; White, 1992).

Some of the other results emerging from these studies are as follows. Gerdtham and Johannesson (2001), Clark and Oswald (1994), and Winkelmann and Winkelmann (1998) find happiness to be positively related with good health. A majority of the studies find education to have a positive effect

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