



Religion and subjective well-being among the elderly in China

Philip H. Brown^{a,*}, Brian Tierney^b

^a Colby College, 5246 Mayflower Hill, Waterville, ME 04901, United States

^b Analysis Group Inc., 650 California Street, Floor 23, San Francisco, CA 94108, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 April 2007

Received in revised form 10 June 2008

Accepted 24 July 2008

JEL classification:

Z12

I31

J14

Keywords:

Religion

Subjective well-being

Aging

China

ABSTRACT

Evidence from developed and developing countries alike demonstrates a strongly positive relationship between religiosity and happiness, particularly for women and particularly among the elderly. Using survey data from the oldest old in China, we find a strong negative relationship between religious participation and subjective well-being in a rich multivariate logistic framework that controls for demographics, health and disabilities, living arrangements, wealth and income, lifestyle and social networks, and location. In contrast to other studies, we also find that religion has a larger effect on subjective well-being on men than women.

© 2008 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Since Easterlin's (1974) pioneering analysis of the interplay between aggregate economic growth and the average subjective well-being of a country's citizens, economists have embraced subjective well-being as an important economic outcome and proxy for individual utility. One prominent line of research has shown that aggregate data on happiness may be used to inform macroeconomic policy. For example, Di Tella et al. (2001) use data from a dozen European countries to infer each country's subjective preferences for the trade-off between unemployment and inflation. Helliwell (2006) estimates the social valuation of good and transparent governance, economic stability, and the rule of law. Alesina et al. (2005) and Gruber and Mullainathan (2002) assess the effect of labor market regulation and cigarette taxes, respectively, on collective well-being.

At the disaggregated level, economists have long held that revealed preference more accurately represents true well-being than subjective states of mind, yet deducing changes in happiness from observed behavior is often difficult in practice. Although care

must be taken in the use and interpretation of subjective data,¹ Lelkes (2006) and Frey and Stutzer (2002a) note that measures of subjective well-being are reliable measures of "experienced utility," and the use of subjective data on well-being has recently been embraced by economists. A popular line of empirical inquiry in the recent research on individual-level well-being has been identifying the determinants of happiness among various population groups. Large-scale surveys conducted in the United States,² the European Union,³ and 81 countries from across the socioeconomic spectrum⁴ demonstrate a considerable degree of consensus: regardless of survey location, robust indicators of subjective well-being include relative income, health status, the strength of social networks, the happiness of friends and relatives, and recent changes in income, marital status, or social networks (Frey and Stutzer, 2002b). Notably, men and women are equally likely to report high-levels of happiness or life satisfaction according to surveys of 170,000 adults in 16 countries (Inglehart, 1990) as well as to a meta-analysis of 146 studies (Haring et al., 1984).

Because faith communities provide social support for their members and encourage hope in the face of vulnerability (Ellison

¹ See Di Tella and McCulloch (2006) and Kahneman and Krueger (2006) for recent reviews.

² *General Social Surveys* (Davis et al., 2001).

³ *Eurobarometer Surveys* (Hartung, 2005).

⁴ *World Values Surveys* (Inglehart et al., 2004).

* Corresponding author at: Colby College, 5246 Mayflower Hill, Waterville, ME 04901, United States. Tel.: +1 207 859 5246; fax: +1 207 859 5229.

E-mail address: phbrown@colby.edu (P.H. Brown).

et al., 1989), because religiously-active individuals tend to rebound from divorce, unemployment, illness, and bereavement more quickly and more fully (Ellison, 1991), and because religion may foster higher expected utility in the afterlife (Azzi and Ehrenberg, 1975), participation in religious activities may also influence subjective well-being. The preponderance of evidence is overwhelming. For example, Myers (2000) uses a survey of 35,000 American adults to show a monotonic positive relationship between the frequency of attendance at religious services and subjective well-being. Gruber (2005) finds that the effect on self-reported well-being of moving from never attending religious services to attending weekly is comparable to the effect of moving from the bottom income quartile to the top quartile. Swinyard et al. (2001) find that religious participation is among the most deterministic predictors of subjective well-being in Singapore.⁵ Indeed, Witter et al. (1985) conduct a meta-analysis of 28 previous studies to find that religious belief and religious participation account for between 2% and 6% of the variation in adult subjective well-being. There is nevertheless some controversy about the interplay of religion and gender in subjective well-being: although Moberg (1965) proposes that religion is a less important determinant of well-being among men than women because of its less central role in the life of men, Witter et al. (1985) find no evidence to support this position.

Inasmuch as religion serves as a “coping mechanism” for elderly people (Cox and Hammonds, 1988) and because religious capital may accumulate across the lifetime (Iannoccone, 1990), religious participation is likely to be particularly important in subjective well-being among the aged. Again, the empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports this conjecture. For example, Blazer and Palmore (1976) and Guy (1982) use longitudinal data to demonstrate that the importance of religion in self-reported well-being increases over the life span. In Japan, religious participation among elderly populations leads to higher subjective well-being (Krause, 2003). Indeed, Okun and Stock (1987) conclude that religion is among the two most important positive influences on subjective well-being (the other being health) in their meta-analysis of the determinants of healthy aging.

While the majority of studies report positive relationships, at least two examples of religiosity *negatively* influencing subjective well-being have nevertheless been described. First, Gee and Veevers (1990) use data for 6500 Canadians to demonstrate a positive correlation between religious involvement and satisfaction with life. Within the subpopulation of adult men in British Columbia, however, 48.7% of religiously “unaffiliated” survey respondents report being “very satisfied” with life, whereas only 38.3% of “actively affiliated” survey respondents report such high levels of satisfaction. Second, Willits and Crider (1988) find that religiosity is positively associated with overall life satisfaction among middle-aged Pennsylvanians. Among men, however, the frequency of church attendance negatively impacts marital satisfaction. Unfortunately, neither study controls for health, demographics, lifestyle, and other correlates of well-being that may bias the estimates. Finally, as we describe below, religious participation and subjective well-being may be negatively related in the presence of widespread religious persecution.

This paper analyzes the influence of religiosity on subjective well-being among Chinese octogenarians, nonagenarians, and centenarians using a robust multivariate framework that controls for demographics, health and disabilities, living arrangements, wealth and income, lifestyle and social networks, and location. Given the

evidence from previous studies, including evidence from countries that share religious traditions with China, we expected to find a positive relationship between religious participation and satisfaction with life; however, we find a robustly negative relationship. Moreover, we find that religious participation has a stronger influence on men’s well-being than on women’s well-being. To our knowledge, this is the first study to uncover such relationships for a large sample while controlling for such a large number of correlates of religiosity. We interpret this finding to be indirect evidence of vulnerability associated with religious persecution, although we cannot test for persecution directly.

Section 2 provides an overview of religion and religious participation in China. Section 3 provides a brief theoretical model. Section 4 describes the data and provides summary statistics for the main variables of interest. Section 5 discusses the empirical specification and identification issues. Section 6 presents the empirical results. Section 7 concludes.

2. Review of religion and religious participation in China

Seen as being antithetical to Marxist, Leninist, and Mao Zedong thought, religion in the People’s Republic of China has been subject to registration, supervision, and odious regulation since 1949. Religious persecution reached a crescendo during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when tens of thousands of religious leaders and adherents were beaten, sentenced to hard labor, or persecuted even more severely (FitzGerald, 1967; Harding, 1997). Religion and religious practice rebounded, however, buoyed by the 1982 “Document 19” which guaranteed that the government would respect and protect belief in five sanctioned faiths – Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism – subject to registration with the State⁶ (Potter, 2003). According to an April 2005 Government White Paper, China has more than 85,000 places of worship and other sites for religious activities, 300,000 members of the clergy, 74 separate training centers for clergy, and more than 3000 distinct religious organizations. Government statistics indicate that there are more than 100 million religious adherents, yet the U.S. Department of State (2006) suggests that the number is likely double the official statistic.

Among the five sanctioned religions, Buddhists make up the largest body of organized religious believers, with more than 100 million followers and 200,000 monks and nuns in the various sects (U.S. Department of State, 2006). These figures are subject to considerable debate, however, because Buddhist organizational structure is not based on congregations and because many Buddhists do not participate in public ceremonies. Although the Chinese government does not publish official estimates of the number of Taoists, Occhiogrosso (1996) reports that approximately 6% of the population engages in popular Taoist activity, including inner alchemy, feng shui, augury, and tao-yin. Academics place the number of devout Taoists at several hundred thousand, including 25,000 Taoist monks and nuns (U.S. Department of State, 2006). China also has 10 predominantly Muslim ethnic groups with approximately 20 million members (U.S. Department of State, 2006). There are more than 40,000 Islamic places of worship, with the highest concentrations in northwestern China. China’s Christian community includes 16 million Protestants according to government statistics, although officials from the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the state-approved Protestant church, estimate that at least 20 million

⁵ See Inglehart (1990), Soydemir et al. (2004), and Lelkes (2006) for evidence of strong positive links between religious participation and subjective well-being in other settings.

⁶ While registration bestows legitimacy on the organization from the government’s perspective, it also entails government control of finances, personnel, publications, and evangelical activity. Registration has also led to the censorship of some religious practices (Human Rights Watch, 1998).

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات