



Maternal Life Satisfaction and Child Outcomes: Are They Related?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 December 2009

Received in revised form 10 June 2010

Accepted 1 October 2010

Available online 15 October 2010

JEL classification:

J13

I22

PsycINFO classification:

2820

2840

2956

Keywords:

Life satisfaction

Subjective well-being

Mothers

Child development

Skill formation

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the association between maternal life satisfaction and the developmental functioning of 2–3-year-old children as well as the socio-emotional behavior of 5–6-year-old children. We use data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), which allows us to control for a rich set of child and parental characteristics and to use the mother's life satisfaction before the birth of her child as an instrument to eliminate potential reverse causality. The results indicate that the more satisfied the mother, the better her child's verbal skills and the lower his or her socio-emotional problems. The relation is more pronounced for boys than for girls. The results are robust even when mothers' personality or mothers' cognitive skills are controlled for.

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1. Introduction

In the recent economic literature, skill formation has been modeled as a cumulative process over the life cycle (Cunha & Heckman, 2007, 2008; Heckman, 2007, 2008). In these models, stages of early childhood play a particularly important role. The importance of the early years of life for the formation of human capital has heightened interest among economists in explaining skill formation in early childhood. So far, economic studies have explained child outcomes mostly by objective measures like income (Taylor, Dearing, & Mc Cartney, 2004), maternal employment (James-Burdumy, 2005; Baum, 2003), and formal child care (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2008; Havnes & Mogstad, 2009; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007). The present study contributes to the literature by investigating the role of mothers' subjective well-being (namely mothers' life satisfaction) in their children's early skill formation. The question is important because part of the effects on child outcomes found by other studies might be driven by maternal well-being. It might not be the mother's employment but rather her satisfaction with life that affects a child's development. Belsky (1984) points out that parental stress is a risk

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factor in children's development. This means that the quality of parental investments in children can be measured not only by objective factors like employment or child care hours but also by parents' subjective well-being.

Measures of subjective well-being have traditionally been used by psychologists to analyze the impact of major life events on individual well-being (e.g., Diener, Lucas, & Napa Scollon, 2006; Lucas, 2007). In the last 20 years, happiness research has been growing not just in sociology and psychology but also in economics, where the role of factors like income and unemployment in individuals' life satisfaction has been analyzed [for an overview, see for instance, Tella and MacCulloch (2006) and Dolan et al. (2008)].

Yet to our knowledge no economic study to date has addressed the question of how child outcomes might be related to mothers' subjective well-being. However, several psychological studies investigated the effects of a pathological form of low subjective well-being, namely postnatal depression, on child outcomes [for recent surveys, see Wiegand-Greife, Geers, Plaß, Petermann, and Riedesser (2009) and Zimmer and Minkovitz (2003)]. They found that depression and depressive symptoms have deleterious effects in several domains: the mother-child relationship, parenting practices, family functioning, and the child's general development. Depression, however, is a very extreme form of individual well-being (very low well-being). In this study, we refer to self-reported well-being data from a broader (nationally representative) group of mothers with young children from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP). We focus on mothers' rather than on fathers' well-being because in most cases the mother is still the main caregiver for the young child.

The paper is organized as follows: in Section 2 we explain the underlying mechanisms through which mothers' subjective well-being might affect children's skill formation. In Section 3 we describe the data set and in Section 4 we present the estimation method. The results and robustness tests are presented and discussed in Section 5. In Section 6 we outline our conclusions.

2. Mechanisms by which mothers' subjective well-being could affect child development

If mothers' overall life satisfaction is associated with child developmental functioning and non-cognitive skill outcomes, the question arises what are mechanisms that might be responsible for the possible association. From a psychological point of view, the relationship could be explained in several ways. First, the psychological well-being of parents has been found to be associated with parenting behavior, which in turn influences child development. Barling, MacEwen, and Nolte (1993) compared the effect of experimentally induced positive and negative mood on mother-son interactions. They found that in the positive mood condition, mothers were more likely to engage in general verbal interaction and to make positive statements to their children. Jouriles, Murphy, and O'Leary (1989) also found indications of a significant relationship between maternal psychological well-being and positive parenting. MacEwen and Barling (1991) provide empirical evidence that the more negative the parents' mood, the more they tended to reject and punish their children. Further, the more rejecting the parent, the higher the child was rated on anxiety and withdrawal as well as on conduct disorder, attention, and immaturity.

A second potentially important mechanism underlying the relation between maternal well-being and child outcomes is the "security" of the attachment between child and main caregiver. The attachment theory in developmental psychology states that the mother-child relationship—that is, the attachment between mother and child—plays a crucial role in the child's earliest years (Bowlby, 1969). The quality of attachment influences important aspects of the child's early development, determining verbal skills and behavioral outcomes. A child's attachment behavior is formed largely during the first year of life and depends on the caregiver's sensitivity and responsiveness in social interactions with the infant (Grossmann & Grossmann, 1996; Sroufe, 1990). A mother's sensitivity and responsiveness, in turn, is influenced by distal factors like her psychological well-being. Belsky (1997) found that secure attachments are fostered when mothers are psychologically healthy and feel supported emotionally as well as instrumentally. He also concluded that mothering behavior is an important determinant of attachment security, more important than, for example, infant temperament.

Attachment theory posits that the quality of the attachment has different effects on various child outcomes. Given the importance of parent-child verbal communication in the development of attachment security (Oppenheim & Waters, 1995), the child's language development is considered to have a particularly strong relationship to attachment security. Abundant evidence of this is found in the empirical attachment literature in psychology (e.g., Van Ijzendoorn, Dijkstra, & Bus, 1995; Korntheuer, Lohaus, & Lissmann, 2007; Meins, 1997; Moss & St-Laurent, 2001). Further, the attachment literature postulates that attachment provides a secure base from which the infants explore the environment, generating stimulation that promotes cognition development. Some empirical studies have identified a link between attachment behavior and children's cognitive development, but the link seems to be less pronounced than for the specific dimension of language development (Van Ijzendoorn et al., 1995; Korntheuer et al., 2007). Moreover, there is a substantial literature in developmental psychology on the role of early attachment insecurity as a risk factor for child behavioral outcomes (e.g., Bates & Bayles, 1988; Glogger-Tippelt, König, Zweyer, & Lahl, 2007; Lyons-Ruth, Alpern, & Repacholi, 1993; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). In the present study, we assess the correlation between maternal well-being and different dimensions of child development; these include verbal competencies, activities of daily living, motor skills, and social skills of children aged 2–3 years as well as the socio-emotional behavior of children aged 5–6 years.

Since attachment theory suggests that more satisfied mothers are more sensitive and responsive to their children and that their children therefore form more secure attachments, we expect to find an empirical link between maternal life satisfaction

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