



The influence of living conditions in early life on life satisfaction in old age

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the influence of living conditions in early life on life satisfaction in old age in eleven Western European countries. It combines the influence of individual conditions, for example housing and family background, with country characteristics in the decade of birth. Using pooled data from the second and third wave of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, multilevel models show that early life living conditions have an influence on life satisfaction in old age. Furthermore, interaction effects between current and past living conditions show that adverse living conditions strengthen the effect of early life on life satisfaction in later life and therefore are an indication of cumulative inequality over the life course.

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1. Introduction

A lot has been written about the association between socioeconomic status – income, wealth, education – and wellbeing. The results from these studies indicate that a favourable position in society is related to higher levels of wellbeing. People with a higher income are more satisfied with their lives (e.g., Diener & Oishi, 2000; George, 2010), live longer (e.g., Phelan, Link, Diez-Roux, Kawachi, & Levin, 2004), and have a better health (e.g., Kim, Sargent-Cox, French, Kendig, & Anstey, 2011) than people with a lower income.

Apart from the positive association between socioeconomic status (SES) and wellbeing on the micro level, the wealth of a country among other country characteristics is also important (Böhnke, 2008; Diener & Oishi, 2000; Heukamp & Ariño, 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010; Zheng, 2012). In addition to the net effect of country conditions, the connection between income and life satisfaction is less pronounced in wealthier countries, although there are still differences between the rich and the poor in these countries (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999).

There are also studies dealing with the relationship between life events and satisfaction such as marriage dissolution, becoming unemployed or getting married (Headey & Wearing, 1989; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). Apart from life course events a long term influence of living conditions in early life on successful ageing (Brandt, Deindl, & Hank, 2012), on health (Lawlor et al., 2005), depression (Wickrama, Noh, & Elder, 2009), and mortality (Palloni, Milesi, White, & Turner, 2009) can be found. Astonishingly, the impact of early life socio-economic status on life satisfaction has – to the best of our knowledge – not been studied explicitly yet, and it is an open question if a comparable impact of early adversity can be found.

Contrary to other measures of wellbeing (e.g., health, depression or successful ageing), life satisfaction is seen as a relatively stable concept that is not dramatically affected by positive or negative life events (e.g., Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; George, 2010), even if the adaptation of life satisfaction is not “perfect” after unfavourable life events (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). Looking at the connection between childhood conditions and life satisfaction can therefore inform us about the formation of the individual satisfaction level.

For that reason, we examine the influence of early life socio-economic status on life satisfaction in old age. Early life living conditions are measured on two levels. On the

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first level, individual characteristics like housing, family conditions and socio-economic status are taken into account. On the second level societal circumstances in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the decade of birth are used to measure the impact of a countries economic performance on life satisfaction. Since unfavourable living conditions in early life might be overcome during the life course, we also estimate the interaction between current and early life conditions.

2. The influence of early life living conditions on life satisfaction in old age

There are two main models on how early life can influence later life outcomes: the pathway and the latency model (see e.g., Haas, 2008; Zhang, Gu, & Hayward, 2008). The latency model supposes a direct link between early life on later life outcomes, where exposure to unfavourable health conditions has a long lasting impact on health in old age (Hertzman & Power, 2004). The pathway model differentiates between direct and indirect influences and assumes that early adversity impacts wellbeing mainly through indirect pathways. For example, a low SES during childhood results in a low SES during adult life that has a direct influence on wellbeing in old age (e.g., Case, Fertig, & Paxson, 2005).

The view that disadvantages in early life have a long lasting impact on wellbeing in old age can be combined with the theory of cumulative inequality, that is also called cumulative disadvantage theory (Schafer, Ferraro, & Mustillo, 2011, p. 1056). According to cumulative disadvantage theory, “statuses and events from early points in the life course pave the road to an individual’s future, creating a divergence between individuals that expands over the course of time” (Schafer et al., 2011, p. 1056). This process of divergence between individuals can be described by two different processes (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). The first approach is based on a direct link, where inequality is transmitted directly from earlier exposure to later life inequality, for example when different portfolios produce different outcomes if the interest rate depends upon the initial amount put into the account, and thus create greater wealth inequality over time (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006, p. 273f.). The second approach follows the status attainment model developed by Blau and Duncan (1967) and distinguishes between direct and indirect effects of initial inequality. For example “growing up in a poor versus a rich family” or single versus two-parent families provoke an accumulation of inequality over time (see DiPrete & Eirich, 2006, p. 273).

The direct approach of cumulative inequality is similar to the latency model where an initial disadvantage results in health problems decades later without any further exposure to unfavourable circumstances (Hertzman & Power, 2004). The model of status reproduction with its emphasis on direct and indirect pathways is closely connected to the pathway model. It is thus obvious that there are not necessarily two or three models to explain the connection between early life living conditions and later life outcomes (see also Hertzman & Power, 2004), but

they can be subsumed under the framework of cumulative inequality.

The differences between the direct and the indirect approach lie in the different accentuation of the underlying dynamics. The main focus of the indirect approach of cumulative inequality is on the process of the accumulation of advantage and disadvantage and how inequality is generated over the life course. The direct approach combines the relationship between exposure to disadvantages in early and in later life without any further negative or positive exposure to disadvantages (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006; Hertzman & Power, 2004; Schafer et al., 2011).

The indirect influence of early living conditions on wellbeing in later life formulated in the pathway model can be modelled as follows: While the social status of parents is important for the living circumstances in early life, it also shapes the living circumstance in later life, if the realized status depends on social origin. Since life satisfaction is influenced by socioeconomic status (e.g., Diener & Oishi, 2000), it also depends on the social status in early life. Furthermore a process of accumulation of inequality might take place over the whole life course when different interrelated mechanisms support the accumulation of advantages or disadvantages (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009).

Cumulative inequality is not directly connected to wellbeing and therefore life satisfaction, it is merely an explanation how childhood living conditions can affect living conditions in later life and therefore influence life satisfaction in old age. Since the application of the pathway model to life satisfaction is not as straightforward as concerning other indicators of wellbeing, an indirect approach is necessary. Childhood living conditions have an indirect influence where early life living conditions influence living conditions later in life and therefore also have an impact on life satisfaction.

Schafer and colleagues suggest that early disadvantages influence the “biographical structuration” (Schafer et al., 2011, p. 1081) and have a negative influence on the perception of life. This view is in line with the reasoning that an evaluation of previous and contemporary social positions influences future action and therefore the possibilities of what can be achieved (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009). Unfavourable living conditions in early life might therefore also have a direct negative impact on wellbeing in later life since the evaluation of one’s position is likely to be negative. If there is a direct connection between early life and wellbeing and additionally an indirect pathway via living conditions in later life in accordance with cumulative inequality, both should reinforce each other.

There are a lot of additional factors that have been shown to influence life satisfaction or subjective wellbeing such as socioeconomic status, health, social integration, social relationships, social support and psychological resources (George, 2010). Diener et al. (1999) described the influence of income, religion, marriage, age, gender, job, and education, among others on life satisfaction. It can be assumed that these factors are of different importance in different periods in life. While emotional closeness to parents might be important in childhood and adolescence (Schwarz et al., 2012), it is less important in later life when

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