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Volunteering, subjective well-being and public policy

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ABSTRACT

We apply matching estimators to the large-scale British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) data set to estimate the impact of volunteering on subjective well-being. We take into account personality traits that could jointly determine volunteering behaviour and subjective well-being. We find that the impact of regular volunteering on subjective well-being is positive and increasing over time if regular volunteering is sustained. In a quantile analysis, we find that this effect seems to be driven by reducing the unhappiness of the less happy quantiles of the well-being distribution for those who volunteer regularly. We test the robustness of our findings and discuss their relevance for public policy.

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1. Introduction

Homo oeconomicus has become a rare breed according to the findings of behavioural economics. Non-selfish behaviour as another driving force of human (economic) activity has made its way into economists' thinking and modelling, and it is relevant in many respects: examples include private fund-raising, organ donations, intergenerational transfers, the funding of public goods as well as support for charities. But altruistic behaviour does not only benefit the recipient. Studies have established a positive relationship between individuals' volunteering activities and their own health (Post, 2005). A similarly positive relationship was found for volunteering and subjective well-being (e.g., Brooks, 2006; Borgonovi, 2008; Meier & Stutzer, 2008). In the present paper, it is this latter relationship we are interested in.

In the empirical part of our paper, we analyse how volunteering is related to individuals' subjective well-being (or "happiness"). We apply our analysis to a large-scale British sample (using data from the British Household Panel Survey for a time span of 15 years). Comparing our results for a different country to the results of Meier and Stutzer (2008) is useful in itself to see whether the volunteering-happiness relationship may differ across countries or cultures. But apart from this, we contribute to the literature in several further ways. First, we aim at addressing some unresolved questions regarding the

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confounding role unobserved variables may play in conventional estimations of the effect volunteering has on subjective well-being (Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008, p. 104). For example, personality traits of an individual may (jointly) influence the degree of volunteering as well as self-reported subjective well-being or lead to self-selection of subgroups into altruistic behaviours: especially “extravert” and “agreeable” persons,¹ who tend to be either more outgoing or cooperative, might self-select into volunteering behaviours, biasing any regression estimates not accounting for this self-selection. To address these problems we first analyse the impact of volunteering on subjective well-being with reference to different personality traits. This has only recently become possible for big household panel data sets, as personality inventories have not been elicited in them up to a short time ago.

Second, we offer an econometric account of the causal impact of volunteering on subjective well-being by making use of “propensity score matching” estimators (Rubin, 1974; Imbens, 2004; Caliendo & Kopeinig, 2008). Propensity score matching is an econometric technique that pays special attention to the information on the distribution of covariates in the treatment versus control groups (so as to allow us to compare individuals that have similar values for all covariates). If there is no substantial overlap in the two covariate distributions, multivariate regression estimates rely heavily on extrapolation, and can therefore be misleading (Imbens, 2004; Ichino, Mealli, & Nannicini, 2008, p. 312–13). Matching estimators are preferable because more care is taken to establish an appropriate control group. They also require no assumptions on functional forms (Hussinger, 2008, p. 730). While widely used in other subfields, to our knowledge, matching estimators have only recently been introduced to the analysis of subjective well-being and its causes and correlates (e.g., Binder & Coad, *in press*).

Our third contribution lies in examining the extremes of the subjective well-being distribution via quantile regressions (Koenker & Bassett, 1978; Koenker & Hallock, 2001). In heterogeneous distributions, regression methodologies that focus on means might seriously under- or overestimate effects or even fail to identify effects at all (Cade & Noon, 2003). Applying quantile regressions in our context, we are able to assess whether the (average) effect of volunteering on happiness that is usually found in the literature might actually be driven by the effect that volunteering has for especially happy or unhappy individuals (the extremes of the distribution).

Finally, we provide a discussion of the implications of our findings for public policy. If volunteering increases the well-being of all individuals involved, can increased volunteering lead to a happier society? Considering the increasing debt level in ageing OECD countries, would it be wise to encourage more volunteering to combat financial gaps and labour shortages, and if so, what policy means are available? These questions become more urgent, the less the (welfare) state is able to provide for the less well-off of its citizens, and we will therefore discuss prospects and pitfalls associated with them.

The paper is organized as follows. We discuss the theoretical background regarding the volunteering-happiness relationship in Section 2. The empirical part of our paper consists of Section 3, where we discuss our econometric strategy, the BHPS data set as well as our findings and robustness checks. We then give particular attention to the implications our analysis might have in the context of public policy in Section 4 before concluding in Section 5.

2. Volunteering and subjective well-being

For the purpose of the present paper, we are interested in volunteering that we define broadly as “. . . any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization” (Wilson, 2000, p. 215). In economics, volunteering is most often examined in relation to the question of whether it constitutes altruistic behaviour or is a form of self-interested behaviour (e.g., Meier & Stutzer, 2008). “Altruism” is a broad notion that comes in many different guises (Becker, 1974; Andreoni, 1989; Khalil, 2004; Konow, 2010). It can pertain to the charitable giving of money (donations) or to volunteering (the giving of one’s time). Different classification schemes for altruism have been proposed in the literature, for example with regard to the question of whether the donor also benefits from altruistic behaviour or not (e.g., Konow, 2010); if an individual simply has a preference for another person’s benefit, this would constitute a case of “pure altruism” (Becker, 1974), whereas “impure altruism” would be behaviour where the altruist experiences a “warm glow” (Andreoni, 1989, 1990) resulting from the behaviour. In this case, altruistic behaviour is beneficial for both donor and recipient (in the extreme, the “altruist” would exhibit this behaviour only because of the pleasurable feelings for him, Harbaugh, 1998). Especially in the case of volunteering, it seems plausible that indeed the volunteer may donate spare time not only for purely other-regarding reasons: it seems well possible that volunteer work is done for the social component of getting together with like-minded persons (e.g. in religious or other non-profit organizations).

While we are mainly interested in the outcomes of volunteering in terms of the subjective well-being of volunteers, it is nevertheless instructive to understand what drives volunteering since it could jointly determine volunteering and subjective well-being. Following the “volunteering process model” (Snyder & Omoto, 1992; Wilson, 2012), we can distinguish between *antecedents*, *experience* and *consequences* of volunteering. In this classification, the interest of the present paper lies in the consequences of volunteering, namely the volunteer’s increased subjective well-being.² The antecedents, i.e. the factors that

¹ Agreeableness and Extraversion are two of the “Big Five” personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 2003).

² The category of volunteering experience refers to „what [it is] like to be a volunteer” and the relationships between volunteers, beneficiaries and volunteering organizations (Wilson, 2012, p. 195) In a broader sense, of course, increased subjective well-being might also be understood as related to the experience of volunteering, but since the volunteer is affected by increased well-being also outside of the volunteering episodes, i.e. we are not looking into the positive mood or attitudes only during the time of volunteering, we think the effects of volunteering on subjective well-being should be classified as a consequence of volunteering.

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